WIRED LOVE

A NOVEL

BY

ELLA CHEEVER THAYER

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WIRED LOVE:

A ROMANCE

OF

DOTS AND DASHES.

BY

ELLA CHEEVER THAYER.

"The old, old story,"—in a new, new way.

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WIRED LOVE.

CHAPTER I.

SOUNDS FROM A DISTANT "C."

— · · · — — · — · · — ·

JUST a noise, that is all.

But a very significant noise to Miss Nathalie Rogers, or Nattie, as she was usually abbreviated; a noise that caused her to lay aside her book, and jump up hastily, exclaiming, with a gesture of impatience :—

"Somebody always 'calls' me in the middle of every entertaining chapter!"

For that noise, that little clatter, like, and yet too irregular to be the ticking of a clock, expressed to Nattie these four mystic letters :—

"B m — X n;"

which same four mystic letters, interpreted, meant that the name, or, to use the technical word, "call," of the telegraph office over which she was present

sole presiding genius, was "B m," and that "B m" was wanted by another office on the wire, designated as "X n."

A little, out-of-the-way, country office, some fifty miles down the line, was "X n," and, as Nattie signaled in reply to the "call" her readiness to receive any communications therefrom, she was conscious of holding in some slight contempt the possible abilities of the human portion of its machinery.

For who but an operator very green in the profession would stay *there?*

Consequently, she was quite unprepared for the velocity with which the telegraph alphabet of sounds in dots and dashes rattled over the instrument, appropriately termed a "sounder," upon which messages are received, and found herself wholly unable to write down the words as fast as they came.

"Dear me!" she thought, rather nervously, "the country is certainly ahead of the city this time! I wonder if this smart operator is a lady or gentleman!"

And, notwithstanding all her efforts, she was compelled to "break"—that is, open her "key," thereby breaking the circuit, and interrupting "X n" with the request,

"Please repeat."

"X n" took the interruption very good-naturedly—it was after dinner—and obeyed without expressing any impatience.

But, alas! Nattie was even now unable to keep up with this too expert individual of uncertain sex, and was obliged again to "break," with the humiliating petition,

"Please send slower!"

"Oh!" responded "X n."

For a small one, "Oh!" is a very expressive word. But whether this particular one signified impatience, or, as Nattie sensitively feared, contempt for her abilities, she could not tell. But certain it was that "X n" sent along the letters now in such a slow, funereal procession that she was driven half frantic with nervousness in the attempt to piece them together into words. They had not proceeded far, however, before a small, thin voice fell upon the ears of the agitated Nattie.

"Are you taking a message now?" it asked.

Nattie glanced over her shoulder, and saw a sharp inquisitive nose, a green veil, a pair of eyeglasses, and a strained smile, sticking through her little window.

Nodding a hasty answer to the question, she wrote down another word of the message, that she

had been able to catch, notwithstanding the interruption. As she did so the voice again queried,

"Do you take them entirely by sound?"

With a determined endeavor not to "break," Nattie replied only with a frown. But fate was evidently against her establishing a reputation for being a good operator with "X n."

"Here, please attend to this quick!" exclaimed a new voice, and a tall gentleman pounded impatiently on the shelf outside the little window with one hand, and with the other held forth a message.

With despair in her heart, once more Nattie interrupted "X n," took the impatient gentleman's message, studied out its illegible characters, and changed a bill, the owner of the nose looking on attentively meanwhile; this done, she bade the really much-abused "X n" to proceed, or in telegraphic terms, to

"G. A. — the."

"G. A." being the telegraphic abbreviation for "go ahead," and "the" the last word she had received of the message.

And this time not even the fact of its being after dinner restrained "X n's" feelings, and "X n" made the sarcastic inquiry,

"Had you not better go home and send down

some one who is capable of receiving this message?"

Now it would seem as if two persons sixty or seventy miles apart might severally fly into a rage and nurse their wrath comfortably without particularly annoying each other at the moment. But not under present conditions; and Nattie turned red and bit her nails excitedly under the displeasure of the distant person of unknown sex, at "X n." But no instrument had yet been invented by which she could see the expression on the face of this operator at "X n," as she retorted, and her fingers formed the letters very sharply;

"Do you think it will help the matter at all for you to make a display of your charming disposition? G. A. — the —."

"I am happy to be able to return the compliment implied!" was "X n's" preface to the continuation of the message.

And now indeed Nattie might have recovered some of her fallen glories, being angry enough to be fiercely determined, had not the owner of the nose again made her presence manifest by the sudden question:

"Do you have a different sound for every word, or syllable, or what?"

And, turning quickly around to scowl this per-

severing questioner into silence, Nattie's elbow hit and knocked over the inkstand, its contents pouring over her hands, dress, the desk and floor, and proving beyond a doubt, as it descended, the truth of its label—

"Superior Black Ink!"

And then, save for the clatter of the "sounder," there was silence.

For a moment Nattie gazed blankly at her besmeared hands and ruined dress, at the "sounder," and at the owner of the nose, who returned her look with that expression of serene amusement often noticeable in those who contemplate from afar the mishaps of their fellow beings; then with the courage of despair, she for the fourth time "broke" "X n," saying, with inky impression on the instrument,

"Excuse me, but you will have to wait! I am all ink, and I am being cross-examined!"

Having thus delivered herself, she turned a deliberately deaf ear to "X n's" response, which, judging from the way the movable portion of the "sounder" danced, was emphatic.

"A little new milk will take that out!" complacently said the owner of the nose, watching Nattie's efforts to remove the ink from her dress with blotting-paper.

"Unfortunately I do not keep a cow here!" Nattie replied, tartly.

Not quite polite in Nattie, this. But do not the circumstances plead strongly in her excuse? For, remember, she was not one of those impossible, angelic young ladies of whom we read, but one of the ordinary human beings we meet every day.

The owner of the nose, however, was not charitable, and drew herself up loftily, as she said in imperative accents,

"You did not answer my question! Do you have to learn the sound of each letter so as to distinguish them from each other?"

Nattie constrained herself to reply, very shortly, "Yes!"

"Can you take a message and talk to me at the same time?" pursued the investigator.

"No!" was Nattie's emphatic answer, as she looked ruefully at her dress.

"But your instrument there is going it now. Ain't they sending you a message?" went on the relentless owner of the nose.

At this Nattie turned her attention a moment to what was being done "on the wire," and breathed a sigh of relief. For "X n" had given place to another office, and she replied,

"No! Some office on the wire is sending to some other office."

The nose elevated itself in surprise.

"Can you hear everything that is sent from every other office?"

"Yes," was the weary reply, as Nattie rubbed her dress.

"What!" exclaimed the owner of the nose, in accents of incredulous wonder. "All over the world?"

"Certainly not! only the offices on this wire; there are about twenty," was the impatient reply.

"Ah!" evidently relieved. "But," considering, "supposing you do not catch all the sounds, what do you do then?"

"Break."

"Break! Break what? the instruments?" queried the owner of the nose, perplexedly, and looking as if that must be a very expensive habit.

"Break the circuit—the connection,—open the key and ask the sending office to repeat from the last word I have been able to catch!"

Then seeing unmistakable evidence of more questions in the nose, Nattie threw the ink-soaked blotting-paper and her last remnant of patience into the waste basket, and added,

"But you must excuse me, I am too busy to be

annoy—interrupted longer, and there are books that will give you all the information that you require!"

So saying, Nattie turned her back, and the owner of the nose withdrew it, its tip glistening with indignation as she walked away. As it vanished, Nattie gave a sigh of relief, and sat down to mourn her ruined dress. Whatever may have been her previous opinion, she was positive now that this was the prettiest, the most becoming dress she had ever possessed, or might ever possess! Only the old, old story! We prize most what is gone forever!

"And all that dreadful man's—or woman's—fault at X n!" cried Nattie, savagely. Unjustly too, for if any one was responsible for the accident, it was the owner of the nose.

But not long did Nattie dare give way to her misery. That fatal message was not yet received.

Glancing over the few words she had of it, she read; "Send the hearse ——," and then she began anxiously "calling" "X n."

"Hearse," looked too serious for trifling. But either "X n's" attention was now occupied in some other direction, or else he—or she—was too much out of humor to reply, for it was full twenty minutes before came the answering,

"X n."

At which Nattie said as fiercely as fingers could,

"I have been after you nearly half an hour!"

"Have you?" came coolly back from "X n." "Well, you are not alone, many are after me—my landlord among others—not to mention a washerwoman or two!"

Then followed the figure "4," which means, "When shall I go ahead?"

"Waxing jocose, are you?" Nattie murmured to herself, as she replied:

"G. A.—hearse ——"

"G. A.—*what?*"

"Hearse," repeated Nattie, in firm, clear characters.

To her surprise and displeasure "X n" laughed—the circumstance being conveyed to her understanding in the usual way, by the two letters "H a!"

"What are you laughing at?" she asked.

"At your grave mistake!" was "X n's" answer, accompanied by another "H a! To convert a *horse* into a hearse is really an idea that merits a smile!"

As the consciousness of her blunder dawned upon her, Nattie would gladly have sank into oblivion. But as that was impossible, she took a fresh blank, and very meekly said,

"G. A.—horse —— !"

With another laugh, "X n" complied, and Nattie

now succeeded in receiving the message without further mishap.

"What did you sign?" she asked, as she thankfully wrote the last word.

Every operator is obliged to sign his own private "call," as well as the office "call," and "O. K." at the close of each message.

"C." was replied to Nattie's question.

"O. K. N. B m," she then said, and added, perhaps trying to drown the memory of her ludicrous error in politeness, "I hope another time I shall not cause you so much trouble."

"C" at "X n" was evidently not to be exceeded in little speeches of this kind, for he—or she—responded immediately,

"On the contrary, it was I who gave you trouble. I know I must certainly have done so, or you never could have effected such a transformation as you did. Imagine the feelings of the sender of that message, had he found a hearse awaiting his arrival instead of a horse!"

Biting her lip with secret mortification, but determined to make the best of the matter outwardly, Nattie replied,

"I suppose I never shall hear the last of that hearse! But at all events it took the surliness out of you."

"Yes, when people come to a hearse they are not apt to have any more kinks in their disposition! I confess, though," "C" went on frankly, "I was unpardonably cross; not surly, that is out of my line, but cross. In truth, I was all out of sorts. Will you forgive me if I will never do so again?"

"Certainly," Nattie replied readily. "I am sure we are far enough apart to get on without quarreling, if, as they say, distance lends enchantment!"

"Particularly when I pride myself upon my sweet disposition!" said "C."

At which Nattie smiled to herself, to the surprise of a passing gentleman, on whom her unconscious gaze rested, and who thought, of course, that she was smiling at him.

Appearances are deceitful!

"I fear you will have to prove your sweetness before I shall believe in it," Nattie responded to "C," all unaware of what she had done, or that the strange young gentleman went on his way with the firm resolve to pass by that office again and obtain another smile!

'It shall be my sole aim hereafter," "C" replied; and then asked, "Have you a pleasant office there?"

"I regret to say no." Then looking around, and describing what she saw—"a long, dark little room, into which the sun never shines, a crazy and

a wooden chair, a high stool, desk, instruments—that is all—Oh! and me!"

"Last but not least," said "C;" "but what a contrast to my office! Mine is all windows, and in cold days like this the wind whistles in until my very bones rattle! The outward view is fine. As I sit I see a stable, a carpenter's shop, the roof of the new Town Hall that has ruined the town, and ——"

"Excuse me,"—some one at another office on the line here broke in—and with more politeness than is sometimes shown in interrupting conversations on the wire—"I have a message to send," and forthwith began calling.

At this Nattie resumed her interrupted occupation of bewailing her spoiled dress, but at the same time she had a feeling of pleased surprise at the affability of "C" at "X n."

"I wonder," she thought, as she took up her book again, and tried to bury the remembrance of her accident therein, "I do wonder if this 'C' is *he* or *she!*"

Soon, however, she heard "X n" "call" once more, and this time she laid her book aside very readily.

"You did not describe the principal part of your office—yourself!" "C" said, when she answered the "call."

"How can I describe myself?" replied Nattie. "How can any one—properly? One sees that same old face in the glass day after day, and becomes so used to it that it is almost impossible to notice even the changes in it; so I am sure I do not see how one can tell how it really does look—unless one's nose is broken—or one's eyes crossed—and mine are not—or one should not see a looking-glass for a year! I can only say I am very inky just now!"

"Oh! that is too bad!" "C" said; then, with a laugh, "It has always been a source of great wonder to me how certain very plain people of my acquaintance could possibly think themselves handsome. But I see it all now! Can you not, however, leave the beauty out, and give me some sort of an idea about yourself for my imagination to work upon?"

"Certainly!" replied Nattie, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye that "C" knew not of. "Imagine, if you please, a tall young man, with ——"

"C" "broke" quickly, saying,

"Oh, no! You cannot deceive me in that way! Under protest I accept the height, but spurn the sex!"

"Why, you do not suppose I am a lady, do you?" queried Nattie.

"I am quite positive you are. There is a certain

difference in the "sending," of a lady and gentleman, that I have learned to distinguish. Can you truly say I am wrong?"

Nattie evaded a direct reply, by saying,

"People who think they know so much are often deceived; now I make no surmises about you, but ask, fairly and squarely, shall I call you Mr., Miss, or Mrs. 'C'?"

"Call me neither. Call me plain 'C'! Or picture, if you like, in place of your sounder, a blonde, fairy-like girl talking to you, with pensive cheeks and sunny——"

"Don't you believe a word of it!"—some one on the wire here broke in, wishing, probably, to have a finger in the pie; "picture a hippopotamus, an elephant, but picture no fairy!"

"Judge not others by yourself, and learn to speak when spoken to!" "C" replied to the unknown; then "To N.—You know the more mystery there is about anything, the more interesting it becomes. Therefore, if I envelop myself in all the mystery possible, I will cherish hopes that you may dream of me!"

"But I am quite sure you can, with propriety be called *Mr.* 'C'—plain, as you say, I doubt not," replied Nattie. "Now, as it is time for me to go home, I shall have to say good-night."

"To be continued in our next?" queried "C."

"If you are not in a cross mood," replied Nattie.

"Now that is a very unkind suggestion, after my abject apology. But, although our acquaintance had a *grave* re-*hearse*-al, I trust it will have a happy ending!"

Nattie frowned.

"If you will promise never to say '*grave*,' '*hearse*,' or anything in the undertaking line, I will agree never to say 'cross!'" she said.

"The *undertaking* will not be difficult; with all my heart!" "C" answered, and with this mutual understanding they bade each other "good-night."

"There certainly is something romantic in talking to a mysterious person, unseen, and miles away!" thought Nattie, as she put on her hat. "But I would really like to know whether my new friend employs a tailor or a dressmaker!"

Was Nattie conscious of a feeling that it would add to the zest of the romantic acquaintance should the distant "C" be entitled to the use of the masculine pronoun?

Perhaps so! For Nattie was human, and she was only nineteen!

CHAPTER II.

AT THE HOTEL NORMAN.

MISS NATTIE ROGERS, telegraph operator, lived, as it were, in two worlds. The one her office, dingy and curtailed as to proportions, but from whence she could wander away, through the medium of that slender telegraph wire, on a sort of electric wings, to distant cities and towns; where, although alone all day, she did not lack social intercourse, and where she could amuse herself if she chose, by listening to and speculating upon the many messages of joy or of sorrow, of business and of pleasure, constantly going over the wire. But the other world in which Miss Rogers lived was very different; the world bounded by the four walls of a back room at Miss Betsey Kling's. It must be confessed that there are more pleasing views than sheds in greater or less degrees of dilapidation, a sickly grape-vine, a line of flapping sheets, an overflowing ash barrel; sweeter sounds than the dulcet notes of old rag-men, the serenades of musical cats, or the strains of a cornet played upon at

intervals from nine P. M. to twelve, with the evident purpose of exhausting superfluous air in the performer's lungs. Perhaps, too, there was more agreeable company possible than Miss Betsey Kling.

Therefore, in the evening, Sunday and holiday, if not in the telegraphic world of Miss Rogers, loneliness, and the unpleasant sensation known as "blues" were not uncommon.

Miss Betsey Kling, who, although in reduced circumstances, boasted of certain "blue blood," inherited from dead and gone ancestors—who perhaps would have been surprised could they have known at this late day how very genteel they were in life,—rented a flat in Hotel Norman, on the second floor, of which she let one room; not on account of the weekly emolument received therefrom, ah, no! but "for the sake of having some one for company." In this respect she was truly a contrast to Mrs. Simonson, a hundred and seventy-five pound widow, who lived in the remaining suite of that floor, and who let every room she possibly could, in order, as she frankly confessed, to "make both ends meet." For a constant struggle with the "ways and means" whereby to live had quite annihilated any superfluous gentility Mrs. Simonson might have had, excepting only

one lingering remnant, that would never allow her to hang in the window one of those cheaply conspicuous placards, announcing :

"Rooms to Let."

Miss Betsey Kling was a spinster—not because she liked it, but on account of circumstances over which she had no control,—and her principal object in life, outside of the never-expressed, but much thought-of one of finding her other self, like her, astray, was to keep watch and ward over the affairs of the occupants of neighboring flats, and see that they conducted themselves with the propriety becoming the neighbors of so very genteel and unexceptionable a person as Miss Betsey Kling. In pursuit of this occupation she was addicted to sudden and silent appearances, much after the manner of materialized spirits, at windows opening into the hall, and doors carelessly left ajar. She was, however, afflicted with a chronic cold, that somewhat interfered with her ability to become a first-class listener, on account of its producing an incessant sniffle and spasms of violent sneezing.

Miss Rogers going home to that back room of hers, found herself still pondering upon the probable sex of "C." Rather to her own chagrin, when she caught her thoughts thus straying, too; for she had a

certain scorn of anything pertaining to trivial sentiment. A little scorn of herself she also had sometimes. In fact, her desires reached beyond the obtaining of the every-day commonplaces with which so many are content to fill their lives, and she possessed an ambition too dominant to allow her to be content with the dead level of life. Therefore it was that any happy hours of forgetfulness of all but the present, that sometimes came in her way, were often followed by others of unrest and dissatisfaction. There were certain dreams she indulged in of the future, now hopefully, now utterly disheartened, that she was so far away from their realization. These dreams were of fame, of fame as an authoress. Whether it was the true genius stirring within her, or that most unfortunate of all things, an unconquerable desire without the talent to rise above mediocrity, time alone could tell.

Compelled by the failure and subsequent death of her father to support herself, or become a burden upon her mother, whose now scanty means barely sufficed for herself and two younger children, Nattie chose the more independent, but harder course. For she was not the kind of girl to sit down and wait for some one to come along and marry her, and relieve her of the burden of self-support. So, from a telegraph office in the country,

where she learned the profession, she drifted to her present one in the city.

To her, as yet, there was a certain fascination about telegraphy. But she had a presentiment that in time the charm would give place to monotony, more especially as, beyond a certain point, there was positively no advancement in the profession. Although knowing she could not be content to always be merely a telegraph operator, she resolved to like it as well and as long as she could, since it was the best for the present.

As she lighted the gas in her room, she thought not of these things that were so often in her mind, but of "C," and then scolded herself for caring whether that distant individual was man or woman. What mattered it to a young lady who felt herself above flirtations?

So there was a little scowl on her face as she turned around, that did not lessen when she beheld Miss Kling standing in her door-way. For Miss Rogers did not, to speak candidly, find her landlady a congenial spirit, and only remained upon her premises because being there was a lesser evil than living in that most unhomelike of all places, a boarding-house.

"I thought I would make you a call," the unwelcome visitor remarked, rubbing her nose, that from

constant friction had become red and shining; "I have been lonesome to-day. I usually run into Mrs. Simonson's in the afternoon, but she has been out since twelve o'clock. I can't make out—" musingly, "where she can have gone! not that she is just the company I desire. She has never been used to anything above the common, poor soul, and will say 'them rooms,' but she is better than no one, and at least can appreciate in others the culture and standing she has never attained," and Miss Kling sneezed, and glanced at Nattie with an expression that plainly said her lodger would do well to imitate, in this last respect, the lady in question.

"I am very little acquainted with Mrs. Simonson," Nattie replied, with a tinge of scorn curling her lip, for, in truth, she had little reverence for Miss Kling's blue blood. "Her lodgers like her very much, I believe; at least, Quimby speaks of her in the highest terms."

"Quimby!" repeated Miss Kling, with a sniffle of contempt. "A blundering, awkward creature, who is always doing or saying some shocking thing!"

"I know that he is neither elegant nor talented, and is often very awkward, but he is honest and kind-hearted, and one is willing to overlook other deficiencies for such rare qualities," Nattie replied,

a little warmly, "and so Mrs. Simonson feels, I am confident."

Miss Kling eyed her sharply.

"Not at all! Allow me, Miss Rogers, to know! Mrs. Simonson endures his blunders, because, as she says, he can live on the interest of his money, 'on a pinch,' and she thinks such a lodger something of which to boast. On a pinch, indeed!" added Miss Kling, with a sneeze, and giving the principal feature in her face something very like the exclamation, "a very tight pinch it would be, I am thinking!" Then somewhat spitefully she continued, "But I was not aware, Miss Rogers, that you and this Quimby were so intimate! The admiration is mutual, I suppose?"

"There is no admiration," replied Nattie, with a flash of her gray eyes, inwardly indignant that any one should insinuate she admired Quimby—honest, blundering Quimby, whom no one ever allowed a handle to his name, and who was so clever, but like all clever people, such a dreadful bore. "I have only met him two or three times since that evening you introduced us in the hall, so there has hardly been an opportunity for anything of that kind."

"You spoke so warmly!" Miss Kling remarked. 'However," conciliatingly, "I don't suppose by

any means that you are in love with Quimby! You are much too sensible a young lady for such folly!"

Nattie shrugged her shoulders, as if tired of the subject, and after a spasm of sneezing, Miss Kling continued:

"As you intimate, he *means* all right, poor fellow! and that is more than I should be willing to acknowledge regarding Mrs. Simonson's *other* lodger, that Mr. Norton, who calls himself an artist. I am sure I never saw any one except a convict wear such short hair!" and Miss Kling shook her head insinuatingly.

From this beginning, to Nattie's dismay, Miss Kling proceeded to the dissection of their neighbors who lived in the suite above, Celeste Fishblate and her father. The former, Miss Kling declared, was setting her cap for Quimby. Mr. Fishblate being an unquestionably disagreeable specimen of the *genus homo*, with a somewhat startling habit of exploding in short, but expressive sentences—never using more than three consecutive words—Nattie naturally expected to hear him even more severely anathematized than any one else. But to her surprise, the lady conducting the conversation declared him a "fine sensible man!" At which Nattie first stared, and then smiled, as it occurred

to her that Mr. Fishblate was a widower, and might it not be that Miss Kling contemplated the possibility of *his* becoming that other self not yet attained?

Fortunately Miss Kling did not observe her lodger's looks, so intent was she in admiration of Mr. Fishblate's fine points, and soon took her leave.

After her departure, Nattie changed her inky dress, and put on her hat to go out for something forgotten until now. As she stepped into the hall, a tall young man, with extremely long arms and legs, and mouth, that, although shaded by a faint outline of a mustache, invariably suggested an alligator, opened the door of Mrs. Simonson's rooms, opposite, and seeing Nattie, started back in a sort of nervous bashfulness. Recovering himself, he then darted out with such impetuosity that his foot caught in a rug, he fell, and went headlong down stairs, dragging with him a fire-bucket, at which he clutched in a vain effort to save himself, the two jointly making a noise that echoed through the silent halls, and brought out the inhabitants of the rooms in alarm.

"What is it? Is any one killed?" shrieked from above, a voice, recognizable as that of Celeste

Fishblate—two names that could never by any possibility sound harmonious.

"What *is* the matter now?" screamed Miss Kling, appearing at her door with the query.

"Have you hurt yourself?" Nattie asked, as she went down to where the hero of the catastrophe sat on the bottom stair, ruefully rubbing his elbow, but who now picked up his hat and the fire-bucket, and rose to explain.

"It's nothing—nothing at all, you know!" he said, looking upward, and bowing to the voices; "I caught my foot in the rug, and ——"

"Did you tear the rug?" here anxiously interrupted the listening Mrs. Simonson, suddenly appearing at the banisters; not that she felt for her lodger less, but for the rug more, a distinction arising from that constant struggle with the "ways and means."

"Oh, no! I assure you, there was no damage done to the rug—or fire-bucket," the victim responded, reassuringly, and in perfect good faith. "Or myself," he added modestly, as if the latter was scarce worth speaking of. "I—I am used to it, you know," reverting to his usual expression in accidents of all descriptions.

"I declare I don't know what you will do

next!" muttered Mrs. Simonson, retreating to examine the rug.

"I think you must be in love, Quimby!" giggled Celeste; an assertion that caused Miss Kling to give vent to a contemptuous "Humph," and awakened in its subject the most excruciating embarrassment. The poor fellow glanced at Nattie, blushed, perspired, and frantically clutching at the fire-bucket, stammered a protest,—

"Now really—I—now!—you are mistaken, you know!"

"But people who are in love are always absent-minded," persisted Celeste, with another giggle. "So it is useless to——"

But exactly what was useless did not appear, as at this point a stentorian voice, the voice of Miss Kling's "fine, sensible man," roared,

"Enough!"

At which, to Quimby's relief, Celeste, always in mortal fear of her father, hastily withdrew. Not so Miss Kling. She silently waited to see if Nattie and Quimby would go out together, and was rewarded by hearing the latter ask, as Nattie made a movement towards the door,—

"May I—might I be so bold as to—as to ask to be your escort?"

"I should be pleased," Nattie answered, adding

with a mischievous glance, but in a low tone, aware of the listening ears above,—

"That is, if you will consent to dispense with the fire-bucket!"

Quimby started, and dropping the article in question, as if it had suddenly turned red-hot, ejaculated,—

"Bless my soul! really I—I beg pardon, I am sure!" then bashfully offering his arm, they went out, while Miss Kling balefully shook her head.

"So, Celeste will insist upon it that you are in love, because you tripped and fell down stairs!" Nattie said, by way of opening a conversation as they walked along—a remark that did not tend to lessen his evident disquietude. And having now no fire-bucket, he clutched at his necktie, twirling it all awry, not at all to the improvement of his personal appearance, as he replied,—

"Oh! really, you know! its no matter! I—I am used to it, you know!"

"Used to falling in love?" queried Nattie, with raised eyebrows.

"No—no—the other, you know, that is—" gasped Quimby, hopelessly lost for a substantive. "I mean, it's a mistake, you know," then with a desperate rush away from the embarrassing subject, "Did

you know we—that is, Mrs. Simonson, was going to have a new lodger?"

"No, is she?" asked Nattie.

"Yes, a young lady coming to-morrow, a—a sort of an actress—no, a prima donna, you know. A Miss Archer. If you and she should happen to like each other, it would be pleasant for you, now wouldn't it?" asked Quimby eagerly, with a devout hope that such might be, for then should he not be a gainer by seeing more often the young lady by his side, whose gray eyes had already made havoc in his honest and susceptible heart.

"It would be pleasant," acquiesced Nattie, in utter unconsciousness of Quimby's selfish hidden thought; "for I am lonely sometimes. Miss Kling is not—not——"

"Oh, certainly! of course not!" Quimby responded sympathetically and understandingly, as Nattie hesitated for a word that would express her meaning. "They never are very adaptable—old maids, you know!"

"But it isn't because they are unmarried," said Nattie, perhaps feeling called upon to defend her future self, "but because they were born so!"

"Exactly, you know, that's why no fellow ever marries them!" said Quimby, with a glance of bashful admiration at his companion.

Nattie laughed.

"And this Miss Archer. Did you say she was a prima donna?" she questioned.

"Yes—that is, a sort of a kind of a one, or going to be, or some way musical or theatrical, you know," was Quimby's lucid reply. "I'll make it a point to —to introduce you if you will allow me that pleasure?"

"Certainly," responded Nattie, and added, "I shall be quite rich, for me, in acquaintances soon, if I continue as I have begun. I made a new one on the wire to-day."

"On the—I beg pardon—on the what?" asked Quimby, with visions of tight-ropes flashing through his mind.

"On the wire," repeated Nattie, to whom the phrase was so common, that it never occurred to her as needing any explanation.

"Oh!" said the puzzled Quimby, not at all comprehending, but unwilling to confess his ignorance.

"The worst of it is, I don't know the sex of my new friend, which makes it a little awkward," continued Nattie.

Quimby stared.

"Don't—I beg pardon—don't know her—his—sex?" he repeated, with wide-open eyes.

"No, it was on the wire, you know!" again ex-

plained Nattie, privately thinking him unusually stupid; "about seventy miles away. We first quarreled and then had a pleasant talk."

"Talk—seventy miles—" faltered the perplexed Quimby; then brightening, "Oh! I see! a telephone, you know!"

"No indeed!" replied Nattie, laughing at his incomprehensibility. "We don't need telephones. We can talk without—did you not know that? And what is better, no one but those who understand our language can know what we say!"

"Exactly!" answered Quimby, relapsing again into wonder. "Exactly—on the wire!"

"Yes, we talk in a language of dots and dashes, that even Miss Kling might listen to in vain. And do you know," she went on confidentially, "somehow, I am very much interested in my new friend. I wish I knew—its so awkward, as I said—but I really think it's a gentleman!"

"Exactly—exactly so!" responded Quimby, somewhat dejectedly. And during the remainder of their walk he was very much harassed in his mind over this interest Nattie confessed in her new friend—"on the wire,"—who *would* appear as a tight-rope performer to his perturbed imagination. And he felt in his inmost heart that it would be a great relief to his mind if this mysterious per-

son should prove a lady, even though, if a gentleman, he *was* many miles away. For Quimby, with all his obtusity, had an inkling of the power of mystery, and was already far enough on the road to love to be jealous.

Of these thoughts Nattie was of course wholly unaware, and chatted gayly, now of the distant "C" and now of the coming Miss Archer, to her somewhat abstracted, but always devoted companion.

CHAPTER III.

VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE FRIENDS.

WITH perhaps one or two less frowns than usual at the destiny that compelled her to forego any morning naps, and be up and stirring at the early hour of six o'clock, Nattie arose next morning, aware of a more than accustomed willingness to go to the office. And immediately on her arrival there, she opened the key, and said, without calling, just to ascertain if her far-away acquaintance would notice it,—

"G. M. (good morning) C!"

Apparently "C" had his or her ears on the alert, for immediately came the response,

"G. M., my dear!"

A form of expression rather familiar for so short an acquaintance, that is, supposing "C" to be a gentleman. "But then, people talk for the sake of talking, and never say what they mean on the wire," thought Nattie. Besides, did not the distance in any case annul the familiarity? Therefore, without taking offense, even without comment, she asked:

"Are we to get along to-day without quarreling?"

"Oh! it is you, is it, 'N'?" responded "C," 'I thought so, but wasn't quite sure. Yes, you, may 'break' at every word, and I will still be amiable."

"I should be afraid to put you to the test," replied Nattie, with a laugh.

"Do you then think me such a hopelessly ill-natured fellow?" inquired "C."

"Fellow!" triumphantly repeated Nattie. "Be careful, or you will betray yourself!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed "C." "Stupid enough of me, wasn't it? But it only proves the old adage about giving a man rope enough to hang himself."

"Don't mention old adages, for I detest them!'

said Nattie. "Especially that one about the early bird and the worm. But I fear, as a *mys*tery, you are not a success, *Mr.* 'C.'"

"A very bad attempt at a pun," said "C." "I trust, however, you will not desert me, now your curiosity is satisfied, Miss 'N.'?"

"Don't be in such a hurry to *miss* me. I have said nothing yet to give you that right," Nattie replied.

"Nevertheless, it's utterly impossible not to miss you. I missed you last night after you had gone home, for instance. But *you*, a great, hulking fellow! No, indeed! In my mind's eye——"

But what was in "C's" mind's eye did not just then appear, for at this interesting point some one at Nattie's window, saying, "I would like to send a message," obliged her reluctantly to interrupt him with,

"Excuse me a moment, a customer is waiting."

She then turned as much of her attention as she could separate from "C" to the customer, enabled, perhaps, to answer the volley of miscellaneous questions poured upon her with unusual affability, on account of the settlement—and in the right direction!—of that vexed question of "C's" sex.

But she could not help thinking, as she glanced at the message finally written, and handed to her,

that had the writer attended a little more to the spelling-book, and a little less to the accumulation of diamond rings, it might have been a very wise proceeding. But perhaps

"Meat me at the train," was sufficiently intelligible for all purposes.

"What was it about your mind's eye?" Nattie asked over the wire, at the first opportunity.

"C" was again on the alert, without being called, for the answer came, after a moment, just long enough for him to cross the room, perhaps.

"As I was saying, in the eye aforesaid, methinks I see a tall slim young lady with blue eyes and light hair, and dimples that come into her cheeks when I stupidly betray my sex."

As "C" said this, Nattie glanced into the glass just over her head at the reflection of her face. A face whose expression was its charm; that never could be called pretty, but that nevertheless suggested a possibility—only a possibility, of being handsome. For there is a vast difference between pretty and handsome. Pretty people seldom know very much; but to be handsome, a person must have brains; an inner as well as an outer beauty.

"How fortunate it is you are not near enough to be disenchanted!" Nattie replied to "C." "Your

mind's eye is very unreliable. Tall! why, I'm only five feet! never was guilty of a dimple, and my eyes are of some dreadfully nondescript color."

"If you are only five feet, you never can look down on me, which is a great consolation," "C" responded. "And for the rest imagination will clothe the unseen with all possible beauty and grace."

"I am sure I am perfectly willing you should imagine me as beautiful as you please," replied Nattie, "As long as we don't come face to face, which in all probability we never shall, you will not know how different from the real was the ideal."

"Please don't discourage me so soon, for I hope sometime we may clasp hands bodily as we do now spiritually, on the wire—for we do, don't we?" said "C" asserting before he questioned.

"Certainly—here is mine, spiritually!" responded Nattie, without the least hesitation, as she thought of the miles of safe distance between. "Now may I ask—"

"Oh! come, come! this will never do! You are getting on altogether too fast for people who were quarreling so yesterday!" broke in a third party, who signed, "Em." and was a young lady wire-acquaintane of Nattie's, some twenty miles distant.

"You think the circuit of our friendship ought to be broken?" queried Nattie.

"Ah! leave that to time and change, by which all circuits are broken," remarked "C."

"Yes, but such a sudden friendship is sure to come to a violent end," Em. said. "Suppose now I should report you for talking so much—not to say flirting—on the wire, which is against the rules you know?"

"In that event I should know how to be revenged, replied "C." "I should put on my 'ground' wire and cut off communication between you and that little fellow at Z!"

Em. laughed, and perhaps feeling herself rather weak on that point, subsided, and Nattie began, "Sentiment—"

But the pretty little speech on that subject she had all ready was spoiled by an operator—who evidently had none of it in his soul—usurping the wire with the prefaced remark,

"Get out!"

The wire being unusually busy, this was all the conversation Nattie and "C" had during the day, but just before six o'clock came the call,

"B m—B m—B m—X n."

"B m," immediately responded Nattie.

"I merely want to ask for my character before

saying g. n. (good night). Haven't I been amiable to-day?" was asked from X n.

"Very, but there is no merit in it, as Mark Tapley would say," replied Nattie. "You had no provocation."

"Now I flattered myself I had 'come out strong!' Alas! what a hard thing it is to establish one's reputation," said "C," sagely; "but I trust to Time, who, after all, is a pretty good fellow to right matters, notwithstanding a dreadful careless way he has of strewing crow's feet and wrinkles."

"Has he dropped any down your way?" asked Nattie.

"Hinting to know my age now, are you? Oh! curiosity! curiosity! Yes, I think he has implanted a perceptible crow's foot or two; but he has spared the hairs of my head, and for that I am thankful! Did you ever see an aged operator? I never did, and don't know whether it's because electricity acts as a sort of antidote, or whether they grow wise as they grow old, and leave the business. The case is respectfully submitted."

"Your organs of discernment must be very fully developed," Nattie replied. "It is fortunate I am too far away to be analyzed personally; but I don't think I will stay after hours to discuss these

things to-night. I am tired, for I have had a run of disagreeable people to-day. So g. n."

"G. n., my dear," said the gallant "C," in whose composition bashfulness seemed certainly to have no part. But then—as Nattie previously had thought—he was along way off.

It must be confessed "C" could hardly fail to have been flattered had he known how full Nattie's thoughts were of him, as she went home that night. A little foolish in the young lady, who rather prided herself on being strong-minded, this deep interest; but hers was a lonely life, poor girl, and "C" was certainly entertaining "over the wire," whatever he might be in a personal interview—of course, not very likely to occur. No! it was all "over the wire!"

As she reached her own door, absorbed in these meditations, she heard the sound of a merry laugh over in Mrs. Simonson's, and saw a large trunk in the hall. From this she inferred that Miss Archer had arrived, a fact Miss Kling confirmed, with uplifted eyebrows, and the remark,

"There must be something wrong about a young woman who has *three* immense trunks!"

Although Nattie felt a desire to make this newcomer's acquaintance, it was less strong than it might have been had she arrived a week sooner;

for it was undoubtedly true that the interest she had in her new invisible friend far exceeded that towards a possible visible one. Such is the power of mystery!

The office now possessed a new charm for her. To the surprise of an idle clerk in an office over the way, who had always noted how particular she was to arrive at exactly eight A. M., and to leave precisely at six P. M., she suddenly began to appear before hours in the morning, and to stay after hours at night. Of course this benighted person was not aware that by so doing she secured quiet chats with "C," uninterrupted, and without being told in the middle of some pretty speech to "Shut up!" or to "Keep out!" by some soured and inelegant operator on the line, to whom the romance of telegraphy had long ago given place to the monotonous, poorly-paid, everyday reality.

And it came to pass that "C" soon shared all her daily life, thoughts and troubles. Annoyances became lighter because she told him, and he sympathized. Any funny incident that occurred was doubly funny, because they laughed over it together, and so it went on.

That "good-night, dear," previously unchallenged, became a regular institution; and still, on

account of those long miles between them, Nattie made only a faint remonstrance when his usual morning salutation grew into "Good-morning, little five-foot girl at B m!" then was shortened to "Good-morning, little girl!"

And all this time it never occurred to them that excepting "N" was for Nattie, and "C" for Clem, they knew really nothing about each other, not even their names.

Thus the acquaintance went on, amid much banter from the before-mentioned "Em.," and interruptions from disgusted old settlers.

It was by no means to the satisfaction of Quimby, that Miss Rogers should thus allow the telegraphic world to supersede the one in which he had a part. That intimacy with Miss Archer, of which he had dreamed, as a means of improving his own acquaintance with her towards whom his susceptible heart yearned, did not make even a beginning. In fact, what with Nattie being engaged all day, and stopping after hours for a quiet talk with "C," and Miss Archer having many evening engagements, the two had never even met. And how a young man was to make himself agreeable in the eyes of a young lady he only caught a glimpse of occasionally, was a problem quite beyond solution by the brain of Quimby.

Two or three times, in his distraction of mind, he had stood in very light clothing, about Nattie's hour of returning home, full twenty-five minutes at the outer door of the hotel, with a cold wind blowing on him. But Nattie, utterly unconscious of this devotion, was enjoying the conversation of "C;" and so at last, half frozen, poor Quimby was compelled to retreat, his object unaccomplished. He would willingly have wandered about the halls for hours, and waylaid her, had it not been that the fear of those two terrific ones, Miss Kling and Mr. Fishblate, "catching him at it," prevailed over all other considerations. As for going to her office, Quimby, in his bashfulness, dared not even walk through the street containing it, lest she should penetrate his motives, and be offended at his presumption. Under these circumstances he began to despair of ever having the opportunity, to say nothing of the ability, of making an impression, when one afternoon he chanced to meet Miss Archer in the vicinity of Nattie's office, and was instantly overwhelmed by a brilliant idea; that was to ask Miss Archer—to whom he had talked much of Nattie during their short acquaintance—if she would call on her with him, omitting the fact that he dared not go alone.

Miss Archer, a little curious to see the lady

with whom, she was secretly convinced, Quimby was in love, readily consented to the proposition; and so it came to pass that Nattie was interrupted in an account she was giving "C" of a man who wanted to send a message to his wife, and seemed to think "My wife, in Providence," all the address necessary, by the unexpected apparition of Quimby, accompanied by a stylish and handsome young lady.

"I—I beg pardon, if I—if I intrude, you know," he stammered, beginning to wish he had not done it, as Nattie, with an "Excuse me, visitors," to "C," rose and came forward. "But I—I brought Miss Archer! To make you acquainted, you know."

"I am indebted to you for that pleasure," Nattie said, with a smile, as she took the hand Miss Archer extended, saying,

"I have heard Quimby speak about you so much, I already feel acquainted."

Quimby blushed, and nervously fingered his necktie.

"Such near neighbors—so lonesome—thought you ought to know each other," he said confusedly

"Yes, I began to fear we were destined never to meet," Nattie replied, as she held the private door open for her visitors to enter, a proceeding contrary to rules, but she preferred rather to trans-

gress in this way, than in manners, and leave her callers standing out in the cold.

"I don't know as we ever should, had it not been for Quimby," said Miss Archer, glancing curiously around the office. "I believe I never was in a telegraph office before. Don't you find the confinement rather irksome?"

"Sometimes," Nattie replied; "but then there always is some one to talk with 'on the wire,' and in that way a good deal of the time passes."

"Talk with—on the wire?" queried Miss Archer, with uplifted eyebrows. "What does that mean? Do tell me, I am as ignorant as a Hottentot about anything appertaining to telegraphy. Nearly all I know is, you write a message, pay for it, and it goes."

Nattie smiled and explained, and then turning to Quimby, asked,

"You remember my speaking about 'C,' and wondering whether a gentleman or lady?"

"Oh, yes!" Quimby remembered, and fidgeted on his chair.

"He proved to be a gentleman."

"Oh, yes; exactly, you know!" responded Quimby, looking anything but elated.

"It must be very romantic and fascinating to talk with some one so far away, a mysterious

stranger too, that one has never seen," Miss Archer said, her black eyes sparkling. "I should get up a nice little sentimental affair immediately, I know I should, there is something so nice about anything with a mystery to it."

"Yes, telegraphy has its romantic side—it would be dreadfully dull if it did not," Nattie answered.

"But—now really," said Quimby, who sat on the extreme edge of the chair, with his feet some two yards apart from each other; "really, you know, now suppose—just suppose, your mysterious invisible shouldn't be—just what you think, you know. You see, I remember one or two young men in telegraph offices, whose collars and cuffs are always soiled, you know!"

"I have great faith in my 'C,'" laughed Nattie.

"It would be dreadfully unromantic to fall in love with a soiled invisible, wouldn't it," said Miss Archer, with an expressive shrug of her shoulders.

Nattie colored a little, and answered hastily;

"Oh! it's only fun, you know;" at which Quimby brightened, and Miss Archer inquired gayly,

"*Pour passer le temps?*"

Nattie nodded in reply, as she took a message from a lady, who had only a few words to send,

but found it necessary to ask about fifteen questions, and relate all her recent family history, concluding with the birth of twins, before being satisfied her message would go all right,—a proceeding that made Quimby stare, and afforded Miss Archer much amusement.

"Oh! that is nothing!" Nattie said, in answer to the latter's significant laugh, when the customer had retired. "Some very ludicrous incidents occur almost daily, I assure you. Truly, the ignorance of people in regard to telegraphy is surprising; aggravating too, sometimes. Just imagine a person thinking a telegraph office is managed on the same principle as those stores where they at first charge double the value of the goods, for the sake of giving people the pleasure of beating them down! It was only yesterday that a woman tried to coax me to take off ten cents, and then snarled at me because I wouldn't, and declared she would patronize some other office next time, as if it mattered to me, except to wish she might! And there was some one calling on the wire with a rush message all the time she was detaining me!"

"They think you ought to be harnessed with a punch, like a horse-car conductor," said Miss Archer, laughing, and added,

"I wish I knew how to telegraph, I would have

a chat with your 'C.' I am getting very much interested in him !"

Quimby twirled his hat uneasily.

"But—I beg pardon, but he may be a soiled invisible, you know !" he hinted, seemingly determined to keep this possibility uppermost.

Before Nattie could again defend her "C" a woman, covered with cheap finery, thrust her head into the window.

"How much does it cost to telegram ?" she asked.

"To what place did you wish to send ?" Nattie inquired.

With a look, as if she considered this a very impertinent question, the woman replied, with a slight toss of her head,

"It's no matter about the place, I only want to know what it costs to telegram !"

"That depends entirely on where the message is going," answered Nattie, with a glance at Miss Archer.

"Oh, does it?" said the woman, looking surprised. "Well, to Chicago, then."

Nattie told her the tariff to that city.

"Is that the cheapest ?" she then asked. "I only want to send a few words, about six."

"The price is the same for one or ten words," said Nattie rather impatiently.

The woman gave another surprised stare.

"That's strange!" she said incredulously. "Well"—moving away—"I'll write then; I am not going to pay for ten words when I want to send six."

"That is a specimen of the ignorance you were just speaking of, I presume," laughed Miss Archer, as soon as the would-be sender was out of hearing.

"Yes," replied Nattie, "it's hard to make them believe sometimes that everything less than ten words is a stated price, and that we only charge per word after that number. And, speaking of ignorance, do you know I once actually had a letter brought me, all sealed, to be sent that way by telegraph."

Miss Archer laughed again, and Quimby inquired,

"I—I beg pardon, but did I understand that the last came within your experience?"

"Yes," Nattie replied, "and I had a young woman come in here once, who asked me to write the message for her, and after I had done so, in a somewhat hasty scrawl, she took it, looked it all over critically, dotted some 'i's,' and crossed some 't's,' I all the time staring, amazed, and wondering if she supposed I could not read my own hand-writ-

ing, then scowled and threw it down disgustedly saying, 'John never can read *that!* I shall have to write it myself. He knows my writing!'"

"Can such things be!" cried Miss Archer.

"But," asked Quimby, from his uncomfortable perch on the edge of the chair, "Isn't there a—a something—a *fac-simile* arrangement?"

"I believe there is, but it is not yet perfected," replied Nattie.

"Ah, well! then the young woman was only in advance of the age," said Miss Archer; "and what with that and the telephone, and that dreadful phonograph that bottles up all one says and disgorges at inconvenient times, we will soon be able to do everything by electricity; who knows but some genius will invent something for the especial use of lovers? something, for instance, to carry in their pockets, so when they are far away from each other, and pine for a sound of 'that beloved voice,' they will have only to take up this electrical apparatus, put it to their ears, and be happy. Ah! blissful lovers of the future!"

"Yes!—I—yes, that would be a good idea!" cried Quimby eagerly; then instantly fearing he had betrayed himself, turned red, and clutched at the mustache that eluded his grasp. Miss Archer looked at him and smiled, and Nattie was about to

expound further when she heard "C" asking on the wire,

"N, haven't your visitors gone yet? Tell them to hurry!"

"You wouldn't say so," Nattie responded to him, "if you knew what a handsome young lady one of my two visitors is. We have been talking about you, too."

"Introduce me, please do," said "C."

"What are you doing, now?" asked Miss Archer, watchful of Nattie's smiling face.

Leaving the key open, Nattie explained, to Quimby's unconcealed dissatisfaction; but Miss Archer was delighted.

"Oh! do introduce me! Can you any way?" she said.

Nattie nodded affirmatively, and taking hold of the key, wrote, "She is as anxious as you are. So allow me to make you acquainted with Miss Archer, a young lady with the prettiest black eyes I ever saw!"

"Is she an operator?" asked "C."

"Doesn't know a dot from a dash," Nattie answered him.

"Then tell her in plain language, that this is the happiest moment of my life, and also that black eyes are my especial adoration!"

"What have you been telling him about me, you dreadful girl?" queried Miss Archer, shaking her head remonstratingly when this was repeated to her. "But you may inform him I am delighted to make his acquaintance, and hope he has curly hair, because it's so nice to pull!"

"With the hope of such a happy occurrence, I will hereafter do up my hair in papers," "C" replied when Nattie had repeated this to him. "But do not slight your other visitor."

"Shall I introduce you?" asked Nattie holding the key open, and turning to Quimby, who had betrayed various symptoms of uneasiness while this conversation was going on, and who now grasped his hat firmly, as if to throw it at the little sounder that represented the offending "C," and answered,

"Oh, no! I—really I—I beg pardon, but it's really no matter about me—you know!"

"He says he is of no consequence," Nattie said to "C."

"He!" repeated "C," "a he, is it? Ought I to be jealous? Is it you, or our black-eyed friend who is the attraction?"

Nattie replied only with a ha!

"Is he talking now?" asked Miss Archer,

mindful of Nattie's smile, and nodding towards the clattering sounder, at which Quimby was scowling.

"No, some other office is sending business now, so our conversation is suspended," answered Nattie, as much to Quimby's relief as to Miss Archer's regret.

"I shall improve the acquaintance, however," the latter said. "I am very curious to know how he looks, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I do not suppose I ever shall," Nattie answered.

"Then you—I beg pardon, but you never expect to see him?" queried Quimby, with great earnestness.

"In all probability we never shall meet. I think I should be dreadfully embarrassed if we should," Nattie replied, as she handed the day's cash to the boy who just then came after it. "Face to face we would really be strangers to each other."

Quimby evinced more satisfaction at this than the occasion seemed to warrant, as Nattie noticed, with some surprise, but several customers claiming her attention, all at once, and all in a hurry, she was kept too busy for some time, to think upon the cause.

As soon as she was at leisure, Miss Archer, with

the remark that they had made an unpardonably long call, arose to go.

"But you must certainly come again," Nattie said, cordially, already feeling her to be an old friend.

"Indeed I shall," she answered, in the genial way peculiar to her. "You have a double attraction here, you know. Can I say good-by to 'C?'"

"I fear not, as the wire is busy," replied Nattie. "But I will say it for you as soon as possible."

"Yes, tell him, please, that I will see him—I mean, hear the clatter he makes—again soon. You, I shall see at the hotel, I hope, now we have met."

"Oh, yes!" Nattie replied. "I am very much indebted to Quimby for making us acquainted."

"Oh! really now, do you mean it?" exclaimed Quimby, with sudden delight. "I am so glad I've done something right at last, you know! Always doing something wrong, you know!" then hugging his hat to his breast, and speaking in a confidential whisper, he added, to the great amusement of the two girls, "I have a presentiment—a horrible presentiment—I'm always making mistakes, you see. I'm used to it, but I couldn't get used to *that*, you know—that some day I shall marry the wrong woman!"

So saying, and with a last glance of implacable

dislike at the sounder, Quimby bowed awkwardly, and departed with the laughing Miss Archer.

Soon after their departure, "C" asked,

"Has Black-Eyed Susan gone?"

"Yes," responded Nattie. "She left a good-by for you, and means to improve your acquaintance."

"Thrice happy I! But about this he? Who is this he? I want to know all about him. Is he a hated rival?"

"Ha! I never heard him say so, but I will ask him if you wish. He lives in the same building with me, and brought Miss Archer, a fellow-lodger, down to introduce her."

"Do you ever go to balls, concerts, theaters, or to ride with him?" asked "C," who seemed determined to make a thorough investigation of matters.

"Dear me! No! He never asked me!"

"Do you wish he would?" persisted "C."

"Of course I do!" replied Nattie, somewhat regardless of truth.

"It is my opinion I shall be obliged to come and look after you," "C" replied, at this admission.

"But you wouldn't know whether you were looking after the right person or not, when you were here!" Nattie said, with a smiling face and sparkling eyes turned in the direction of an urchin, flattening his nose against her window-glass, who

immediately fled, overwhelmed with astonishment, at being, as he supposed, so smiled upon.

"And why wouldn't I?" questioned "C."

"Because I should recognize you immediately, and should pretend it was not I, but some substitute," replied Nattie.

"You seem to be very positive about recognizing me. Is your intuitive bump so well-developed as all that?" asked "C."

"Yes," Nattie responded. "And then you know there would be a twinkle in your eye that would betray you at once."

"Indeed! We will see about that, young lady. But now, as a customer has been drumming on my shelf for the past five minutes, in a frantic endeavor to attract my attention, and has by this time worked himself into a fine irascible temper, because I will not even glance at him, I must bid you good-night, with the advice, watch for that *twinkle*, and be sure you discover it!"

CHAPTER IV.

NEIGHBORLY CALLS.

IN the opinion of Miss Betsey Kling, a lone young woman, who possessed three large trunks, a more than average share of good looks, and who went out and came in at irregular and unheard-of hours, was a person to be looked after and inquired about; accordingly, while Miss Archer was making the acquaintance of Nattie, and of the invisible "C," Miss Kling descended upon Mrs. Simonson, with the object of dragging from that lady all possible information she might be possessed of, regarding her latest lodger. As a result, Miss Kling learned that Miss Archer was studying to become an opera singer, that she occasionally now sang at concerts, meeting with encouraging success, and further, that she possessed the best of references. But Miss Kling gave a sniffle of distrust.

"Public characters are not to be trusted. Do you remember," she asked solemnly, "do you remember the young man you once had here, who ran away with your teaspoons and your tooth-brush?"

Ah, yes! Mrs. Simonson remembered him

perfectly. Was she likely to forget him? But he, Mrs. Simonson respectfully submitted, was not a singer, but a commercial traveler.

Miss Kling shook her head.

"That experience should be a warning! You cannot deny that no young woman of a modest and retiring disposition would seek to place herself in a public position. Can you imagine *me* upon the stage?" concluded Miss Kling with great dignity.

Mrs. Simonson was free to admit that her imagination could contemplate no such possibility, and then, neither desirous of criticising a good paying lodger, or of offending Miss Kling—that struggle with the ways and means having taught her to offend no one if it could possibly be avoided—she changed the subject by expatiating at length upon a topic she always found safe—the weather. But Miss Celeste Fishblate coming in, Miss Kling left the weather to take care of itself, and returned to the more interesting discussion, to her, of Miss Archer.

Celeste, a young lady favored with a countenance that impressed the beholder as being principally nose and teeth, and possessing a large share of the commodity known as *gush*, was ready enough to be the recipient of her neighbor's collection of gossip. But, to Miss Kling's no small disgust, she was rather lukewarm in pre-judging the new-comer.

In truth, although somewhat alarmed at the "three trunks," lest she should be out-dressed, she was already debating within herself whether Miss Archer, as a medium by which more frequent access to Mrs. Simonson's gentlemen lodgers could be obtained, was not a person whose acquaintance it was desirable to cultivate. Moreover, the words opera singer raised ecstatic visions of a possible future introduction to some "ravishing tenor," the remote idea of which caused her to be so visibly preoccupied, that Miss Kling took her leave with angry sniffles, and returned home to ponder over what she had heard.

A few days after, Nattie, who had quite paralyzed Miss Kling by refusing to listen to what she boldly termed unfounded gossip about her new friend, went to spend an evening with her.

Miss Archer occupied a suite of rooms, consisting of a parlor and a very small bed-room that had been Mrs. Simonson's own, but which on account of the "ways and means" she had given up now, confining herself exclusively to the kitchen, fitted up to look as much like a parlor as a kitchen could.

"And how is 'C'?" asked Miss Archer as she warmly welcomed her visitor.

"Still as agreeable as ever," Nattie replied. "I told him I was coming to see you this evening, and

he sent his regards, and wished he could be of the party."

"I wish he might. But that would spoil the mystery," rejoined Miss Archer. "Do you know what the 'C' is for?"

"Clem," he says. His other name I don't know. He would give me some outlandish cognomen if I should ask. But it isn't of much consequence."

"It might be if you should really fall in love with him," laughed Miss Archer.

"Fall in love! over the wire! That is absurd, especially as I am not susceptible," Nattie answered, coloring a trifle, however, as she remembered how utterly disconsolate she had been all that morning, because a "cross" on the wire had for several hours cut off communication between her office and "X n."

"You think it would be too romantic for real life? Doubtless you are right. And the funny incidents—have you anything new in your note-book?"

"Only that a man to-day, who had perhaps just dined, wanted to know the tariff to the U—nited St—at—ates," answered Nattie, glancing at some autumn leaves tastefully arranged on the walls and curtains. "But 'C' was telling me about a mistake that was lately made—not by him, he vehemently asserts, although I am inclined to think it was; the message as originally sent was, 'John is dead, be at

home at three,' when it was delivered it read, 'John is dead *beat*, home at three.'"

"How was that possible?" asked Miss Archer, laughing,

"I suppose the sending operator did not leave space enough between the words; we leave a small space between letters, and a longer one between words," explained Nattie.

"The operator who received it must have been rather stupid not to have seen the mistake," Miss Archer said. "I have too good an opinion of your 'C' to believe it was he. But every profession has its comic side as well as its tricks, I suppose; mine, I am sure, does. But I am learning something every day, and I am determined," energetically, "to fight my way up!"

Stirred by Miss Archer's earnestness, there came to Nattie an uneasy consciousness that she herself was making no progress towards her only dreamed of ambition, and a shade crossed her face; but without observing it, Miss Archer continued,

"I always had a passion for the lyric stage, and now there is nothing to prevent—" did a slight shadow here darken also her sunny eyes, gone instantly?—"I shall make music my life's aim. Fortunately I have money of my own to enable me to study, and——"

Miss Archer's speech was here interrupted in a somewhat startling manner, by the door suddenly flying open, banging against the piano with a prodigious crash, and disclosing Quimby, red and abashed, outside.

Nattie jumped, Miss Archer gave a little scream, and the Duchess, Mrs. Simonson's handsome tortoise-shell cat, so named from her extreme dignity, who lay at full length upon a rug, drew herself up in haughty displeasure.

"I—I beg pardon, I am sure!" stammered the more agitated intruder. "Really, I—I am so ashamed I—I can hardly speak! I was unfortunate enough to stumble—I'm used to it, you know,—and I give you my word of honor I never saw such a—such an extremely lively door!"

"It is of no consequence," Miss Archer assured him. "Will you come in?"

"Thank you, I—I fear I intrude," answered Quimby, clutching his watch-chain, and glancing at Nattie, guiltily conscious of the strong desire to do so that had taken possession of him since the sound of her voice had penetrated to his apartment, and in perfect agony lest she should surmise it. However, upon Miss Archer's assuring him that they would be very glad of his company, he ventured to enter. But the door still weighed upon

his mind, for after carefully closing it, he stood and stared at it with a very perplexed face.

"Never saw such a lively door, you know!" he repeated, finally sitting down on the piano-stool, and folding both arms across one knee, letting a hand droop dismally on either side, while he looked alternately at Miss Archer, Nattie, and the part of the room mentioned, at which the former laughed, and then, with the kind intention of drawing his mind from the subject of his forced appearance, suggested a game of cards.

"Then we shall have to have one more person, shall we not?" Nattie asked, at this proposition.

"It would be better," replied Miss Archer. "Let me see—Mrs. Simonson does not play——"

"Mr. Norton does!" interrupted Quimby, forgetting the door, in his eagerness to be of service. "I—I would willingly ask him to join us, if you will allow me!"

"That queer young artist who lodges here, you mean?" inquired Miss Archer.

"Oh! But he is a dreadful Bohemian!" commented Nattie, distrustfully, before Quimby could reply.

"Is he?" laughed Miss Archer. "Then ask him in by all means! I am something of a Bohemian myself, and shall be delighted to meet a kindred

soul! I do not know as I have ever observed the gentleman particularly, but if I remember rightly, he wears his hair very closely cropped, and is not a model of beauty?"

"But he is just as nice a fellow as if he was handsome outside!" said Quimby earnestly, doubtless aware of his own shortcomings in the Adonis line. "He is a little queer to be sure, doesn't believe in love or sentiment or anything of that sort, you know, and he says he wears his hair cropped close because people have a general idea that artists are long-haired, lackadaisical fellows,—not to say untidy, you know,—and he is determined that no one shall be able to say it of him!"

Miss Archer was much amused at this description.

"He certainly is an odd genius, and decidedly worth knowing. Bring him in, I beg of you," she said.

But Quimby hesitated and glanced at Nattie.

"He is not very unconventional, I—I do not think he will shock you very much if you do not get him at it, you know!" he said to her apologetically.

"Oh! I am not at all alarmed!" said Nattie, adding, as her thoughts reverted to Miss Kling, "I think, after all, a Bohemian is better than a perfect model of conventionalism!"

Miss Archer heartily indorsed this sentiment,

and Quimby went in quest of Mr. Norton, with whom he soon returned.

Unlike enough to the melancholy artist of romantic fame was Mr. Norton. Short, rather stout, inclined to be red in the face, large-nosed, scrupulously neat in dress, clean shaven, and closely-cropped hair—all this the observing Miss Archer saw at a glance as she bowed to him in response to Quimby's introduction. But the second glance showed her that the expression of his face was so jovial that its plainness vanished as if by magic on his first smile.

If Nattie, possibly a trifle prejudiced in his disfavor, expected him to outrage common propriety in some way, such as keeping on his hat, smoking a black pipe, or turning up his pantaloons leg, she was utterly—shall we say disappointed? Truth to tell, before ten minutes had elapsed from the time of his arrival, she was wishing she knew more "Bohemians," and even hoping "C" was one!

At home as soon as he entered the room, in a very short time the strangers of a moment ago were his life-long friends. Full of anecdotes and quaint remarks, he was the life of the little party. Miss Archer, however, was a very able backer—Cyn, as they all found themselves calling her soon after Jo Norton's advent, and forevermore.

"Cyn was," as its owner said, "short" for the samewhat lofty name of Cynthia.

Doubtless, the fact of these two, who were partners, beating nearly every game they played, was not without its effect in promoting their most genial feelings. A result brought about, not so much by their skill, as by Quimby's perpetually forgetting what was trumps, confounding the right and left bowers, and disregarding the power of the joker.

And in truth Quimby's mind was more on his partner than on the game, and he was becoming more and more awake to the fact that his heart was fast filling with admiration and adoration of which she was the object, and inevitably must soon overflow! For Nattie was really looking her very best this evening. It was excitement and animation that her face depended upon for its beauty. Miss Archer's companionship, too, was doing much towards promoting the cheerfulness that brought so clear a light to her eyes—the light that was now dazzling Quimby. For Cyn was one of those people who live always in the sunshine, and seem to carry its own brightness around with them, while Nattie, on the contrary, oftentimes dwelt among the shadows, and a touch of their somberness hung over her, and showed itself upon her face.

But none of these lurking shadows were there

to-night, and as a consequence, Quimby was unable to keep his eyes off her, and sighed, and made misdeals, and became generally mixed. His embarrassment was not lessened when Cyn mischievously informed him he had certainly found favor in the eyes of Miss Fishblate—who had called upon her the day before. He dropped the pack of cards he happened to have in his hand at the moment, all over the floor, and then dived so hastily to pick them up that his head came in violent contact with the edge of the table, and for a moment he was almost stunned.

But in answer to Cyn's anxious inquiry if he was hurt, he replied,

"It's nothing! I—I am used to it, you know!" Notwithstanding which assertion his forehead developed such a sudden and terrific bump of benevolence, that Cyn insisted upon binding her handkerchief over it. Thus, with his head tied up, and secretly lamenting the unornamental figure he now presented to the eyes of his partner and charmer, Quimby resumed the game. But what with this cause of uneasiness, and a latent fear that Cyn's jesting remark about Celeste might be true, a fear he had privately been conscious of previously, although the least conceited of mortals, Quimby played so badly—and indeed would undoubtedly

have answered "checkers," had he been asked suddenly what game he was playing, on account of his meditations on a checkered existence—that the cards were soon abandoned, and Cyn delighted them with several songs, and a recitation of "Lady Clara Vere de Vere."

While Cyn was singing, Nattie happened to glance at Mr. Norton, and suddenly remembering a sentence in a lately-read novel about some one looking with "his soul in his eyes," wondered if that was not exactly what Mr. Norton was doing now? She did not notice, however, that it was certainly what Quimby was trying not to do! She wondered too, if the young artist was paying Cyn some private compliments, for they seemed to be talking together apart, as all were bidding each other good-night. If so, she could not understand why Cyn should look so mischievous over it. It was but a momentary thought, however, forgotten as they all mutually agreed that the pleasant evening just passed should be but the beginning of many. The circumstance was recalled to her mind, however, and explained the next day, for on returning from the office she found under her door a pen and ink sketch, of which she knew at once Cyn was the designer, and Mr. Norton the executor. It represented two rooms, one on each side of a partition;

in one was a table, containing the ordinary telegraphic apparatus, before which sat a young lady strangely resembling Miss Nattie Rogers, with her face beaming with smiles, and her hand grasping the key. In the other, a young man with a very battered hat knelt before the sounder on his table, while behind him an urchin with a message in his hand stared unnoticed, open-mouthed and unheard; far above was Cupid, connecting the wires that ran from the gentleman to the lady.

"What nonsense!" murmured Nattie, laughing to herself; but she put the picture away in her writing desk as carefully as she might some cherished memento.

CHAPTER V.

QUIMBY BURSTS FORTH IN ELOQUENCE.

"THAT young lady over there acts very strangely. She is not crazy, is she?" inquired a gentleman who stood leaning against the counter over the way, and looking across at Nattie.

"I don't know what to make of her," the pre-

viously mentioned clerk, to whom this question was addressed, answered, "I have been observing her for some weeks; she sits half the time as you see her now, laughing to herself and gesticulating. Sometimes she will lean back in her chair and absolutely shake with laughter, and she smiles at vacancy continually. She seems all right enough with the exception of these vagaries. But she is a perfect conundrum to me."

"A bit luny, I think," said the gentleman, who had asked the question.

Just then, Nattie, who, of course, was talking to "C," and telling him about that sketch—with the slight reservation of the Cupid,—happened to look up, with her gaze seventy miles away; but becoming aware of the curious stares of the two gentlemen opposite, her vision shortened itself to near objects, and rightly surmising from their looks the tenor of their thoughts, she colored, and straightway turned her back, at the same time informing "C" of what she termed their impertinence. But "C" answered, with a laugh,

"It cannot but look strange, you know, to outsiders, to see a person making such an ado apparently over nothing. Put yourself, if you can, in the place of the uninitiated; you come along, see an operator quietly seated, reading the newspaper, with

his feet elevated on a chair or table, the picture of repose. Suddenly up he jumps, down goes the paper, he seizes a pencil, hurriedly writes a few words, frowns violently, pounds frantically on the table, stares savagely at nothing, bursts suddenly into a broad smile, and then quietly resumes his first position. Wouldn't these seem like rather eccentric gambols to you, if you didn't know their solution?"

"Ha! Doubtless," answered Nattie. "So I suppose I must forgive my observers, and be more careful what I do in future. I have no doubt I often make myself ridiculous to chance beholders, when I am talking with you."

"I wonder if that is complimentary to me?" queried "C."

"Certainly, as it is because you make me laugh so much," Nattie replied.

"Then I am not such a disagreeable fellow as I might be?" demanded "C," evidently attempting to extort flattery.

But before Nattie could answer, some one else opened their key, and said,

"Oh, yes you are!"

"That was not me," Nattie explained, as quickly as possible. "Some of those unpleasant people that can't mind their own business. I was about to

say I should not know how to get through the days now, if I hadn't you to talk with."

"Do you really mean it?" questioned "C," delightedly, it is reasonable to suppose. "Truly, I was thinking only last night how unbearable would have been the solitude of my office, had I not been blessed with your company. I was lonesome enough before I knew you, but I never am now."

It was a pity that no telegraphic instrument had yet been invented that could carry the blush on Nattie's cheeks for his eyes to see, because it was so very becoming. She commenced a reply, expressing her pleasure, but was unable to finish it, on account of that unknown and disagreeable operator somewhere on the line, who kept breaking the circuit after every letter she made. Nor was "C" allowed to write anything either. This was a trick by which they had often been annoyed of late.

For, on the wire in the telegraphic world, as well as elsewhere, are idle, mischief-making people, who cannot endure to see others enjoying themselves, if they also have no share.

Thus, unable to talk farther at present with her indefatigable conversationalist, Nattie took up a pencil and began entering the day's business in her books, when a shadow darkened the doorway, and she looked up to see Quimby.

Since the evening of the card party, when he had become so fully conscious of the condition of things inside his heart, Quimby had been in a really pitiable state of unrest. Too bashful, or too deficient in self-confidence to seek the society of her who was the cause of all his uneasiness, as his inclinations directed, and not knowing how to make himself as charming to her as she was to him, he wandered past the building containing her, two or three times a day, sometimes receiving the pleasure of a bow as he passed her window, but never before to-day being able to raise the necessary courage to go in and speak.

Nattie, who could not but begin to surmise something of the state of his feelings, but without dreaming of their intensity, now smiled on him, and asked him inside the office. No man or woman can be quite indifferent to one, whom they know has set them on a pedestal, apart from the rest of the world.

"I—really I—I beg pardon, I'm sure," the agitated Quimby, trembling at his own daring, responded to her invitation. "I—I was passing —quite accidentally, you know,—thought I would just step in, you know. Really, I—I must ask pardon for the liberty."

"We are too old acquaintances now for you to

consider it a liberty," Nattie replied, and the words made his perturbed heart jump with joy. "Business being quite dull to-day, I shall be glad to be entertained. Of course," archly, "you came to entertain me?"

Poor Quimby was decidedly taken aback by this question.

"I—I—yes certainly—no—that is—I mean I am afraid I am not much of an entertainer," he stammered, his hands flying to his necktie and nervously untying it as he spoke. Certainly, the wear and tear on his neckties and watch chain while he was in his present condition of love must have been terrific.

"Aren't you?" queried Nattie without gainsaying his assertion.

"No—really you know I—I'm always making mistakes—but I'm used to it, you know—and I am not—possibly I might be a trifle better than nobody—but that's all."

And having given this honest, and certainly not conceited opinion of himself, he entered the office, sat down, and proceeded to make compasses of his legs.

"Have you seen Cyn to-day? she paid me a flying visit yesterday, and talked a little to 'C,' but I haven't seen her since."

"She went away to sing out of town, let me see—I

forget where, and she will not return until to-morrow;" then, uneasily, "I—I beg pardon, but you—you mentioned the Invisible. Do you—I beg pardon—but do you converse as much as ever with him?"

"Yes indeed!" Nattie replied with an ardor that did not produce exactly an enlivening effect upon her caller; "we talk together nearly all the time."

"What—I beg pardon—but really—what do you find to talk about so much?" he inquired jealously.

"Oh, everything! of the books we read, and the good things in the magazines and papers, and the adventures we have—telegraphically; in short, of all the topics of the day. We agree very well too, except on candy, that I like and he doesn't," replied Nattie.

Quimby suppressed a groan, and hastened to assure her that he himself possessed a great passion for sweetmeets.

"But don't you—I beg pardon—but don't you find this sort of thing—'C,' I mean—ghostly, you know?"

"Ghostly!" echoed the astonished Nattie.

"Yes," he replied, with a gesture of his arm that produced an impression as if that member had leaped out of its socket. "Yes, talking with the unseen, you know; I—I beg pardon, but it strikes me as ghostly."

Nattie stared.

"What a strange fancy!" she exclaimed. "'C' is very real, and of the earth, earthy to me, I assure you!"

Quimby's face lengthened some three inches. "Is he?" he said ruefully. "I—I beg pardon, but you haven't—you don't mean to say that—you have not taken a—bless my soul! how warm it is here!" and he mopped his face with a red silk handkerchief—a color very unbecoming to his complexion.

"Warm!" repeated Nattie, her lips curving in an amused smile, for she had a shawl over her shoulders, and was nevertheless slightly chilly. "I don't perceive it, I am sure."

"I—I beg pardon—but I've been walking, you know," Quimby said nervously. "But I—I was about to ask—I—I beg pardon—but you have not—not" desperately, "really fallen in love with him, have you?"

Nattie's eyes danced with amusement, but her color deepened slightly too, as she replied,

"How could one fall in love with an invisible? why, that would be even less satisfactory than an ideal!"

Quimby's face brightened, and he recovered himself sufficiently to put away the red silk handkerchief.

"I don't think—really, I should not think there could be much satisfaction in it!" then stealing a bashful but adoring glance at her, he added,

"I—I prefer a—a visible, as being something more substantial, you know!"

"Indeed?" said Nattie, demurely; then thinking perhaps he was drifting on to grounds that had best be avoided, she changed the subject, by saying,

"Do you not think Cyn a very charming young lady?"

"Oh, yes! I—I—yes, very charming!" Quimby answered, but not so enthusiastically as perhaps Mr. Norton might have done. For Quimby's heart was of the old-fashioned kind, and his fancy was not fickle; besides, being now, in a measure, launched upon the subject, of love, so awful to approach, he was unwilling thus soon to leave a theme so sweet, yet so formidable. Therefore, crossing his legs, and bracing up against the chair-back, he determined, now or never, to give her an inkling of his feelings, an intention so very palpable, that Nattie was glad indeed to hear from the sounder,

"B m—B m—B m—."

"Excuse me," she said, hastily. "They are calling me on the wire," and immediately answered, and began taking a message.

Meanwhile, to him had come a reaction, and he was in a state of total collapse. Before she had finished receiving that message of only ten words, he had drawn himself dejectedly to his feet, and was looking for his hat.

"I—I really—I must go, you know!" he faltered, blushing, as Nattie glanced up at him. "I—I fear I have intruded now—but I—I—" he stopped short, unable to find an ending to his sentence.

"I'm always glad of company," Nattie said, but a little distantly, as she gave "O. K." on the wire.

"I—I—really, you are very kind, you know," stammered Quimby. "I—I pass here on the way to dinner, you see—from the office, you know,"—he eked out his meagre income by writing in a lawyer's office—"where, 'pon my word, I ought to have been now. But it's—it's such a pleasure to see you—you know that—where can my hat be?"

All this time he had been looking around for his hat, and now Nattie fished it out of the waste basket, into which he had unwittingly dropped it. Taking it with many apologies, he bowed himself confusedly and ungracefully out, and went away, wondering if he would ever be able to get himself up to such a pitch again, and resolving, if it proved possible, that it should not occur next time where there was one of those aggravating "sounders."

"Now, I hope," thought Nattie, as she watched his retreating form, "that he is not going to make an idiot of himself! Not only because he is as good a fellow as he is a blundering one, and I wouldn't for the world hurt his feelings, but also because it would be dreadfully uncomfortable to have a rejected lover wandering around in the same house with one!"

And Nattie, judging from his late conduct that the contingency referred to was likely to occur, resolved to be careful and not give him any opportunity to express his feelings, and furthermore, to kindly and cautiously teach him the meaning of the word Friendship, and particularly to define the broad distinction between that and Love.

But circumstances are mulish things, and not to be governed at will, as Nattie was soon to discover.

A few evenings after she called in to see Cyn, who happened to be out. But she was momentarily expected to return, as Mrs. Simonson said, so Nattie concluded to wait, and sat down at the piano. Not noticing she had left the door partly open, and never dreaming of approaching danger, she began to play, when suddenly, the hesitating voice of Quimby broke in upon the strains of the "First Kiss" waltz.

"I—may I come in?" he asked. "I—I beg

your pardon, but I knocked several times, you know, and you didn't hear at all."

Nattie would gladly have refused the invitation he asked, but could think of no possible excuse for so doing, and was therefore compelled to say,

"Yes—come in, I expect Cyn every moment."

Availing himself of this permission, Quimby entered, balanced his hat on the edge of an album, and seating himself in a chair, seized a round on either side as if he was in danger of blowing away, and stared at her without a word.

"It has been a lovely day, hasn't it?" Nattie said at last, beginning to find the silence embarrassing, and reverting to Mrs. Simonson's safe topic.

"Yes—exactly so!" Quimby answered, strengthening his grasp on the chair in a vain endeavor to summon the requisite courage to avail himself of this rare opportunity of pouring out his feelings.

Nattie tried him again on another safe topic.

"Cyn and I dined together to-day."

"I—I can't eat!" burst forth Quimby in accents of despair.

"Can't you?" said Nattie, devoutly wishing Cyn would come. "I am very sorry, I hope you are not dyspeptic."

"No, no!" he answered, his eyes almost starting from his head between his determination to wind himself up to the point, and the tightness of his grasp on the chair. "It's—it's my heart, you know!"

"You don't mean to say you have heart disease?" said Nattie, seeing danger fast approaching, and taking refuge in obtusity.

"No, I—I beg pardon—not a—not a bodily heart disease, you know, but a mental one!" and he relaxed his grasp on the chair with one hand to tug at his necktie as if being hung, and disliking the sensation.

"That is something I never heard of," Nattie said dryly; then thinking, "I'll drown him in music," she asked hastily,

"Do you like the First Kiss?"

The bounce of an India rubber ball is no comparison to the agility with which Quimby jumped from his chair at this question.

"Oh! Bless my soul! Wouldn't I?" he gasped.

"I will play it to you," exclaimed Nattie, instantly aware of the indiscretion of her question, and she thundered as loud as she could on the piano, while Quimby, with a very red face, subsided into the chair again. But not long did he remain subsided; whether it was the music that inspired

him, or a desperate determination that nerved him, he suddenly sprang up, and with one stride was beside her, exclaiming excitedly,

"No! That is—I beg pardon—but please do not play any more just now. There is something I must say to you! Oh! I can't express myself! It all comes upon me with a rush when I am alone, but now, at this supreme moment, I cannot tell you how I a——"

"Excuse me, but I am afraid I cannot remain now," hastily interrupted Nattie, feeling that something must be done to stop him, and adopting the first expedient that suggested itself. "I just happened to recollect I left my gas burning in close proximity to the lace curtains, and I must go immediately and attend to it."

With these words, Nattie rushed away, half amused and half annoyed, leaving him to stare after her with a blank and rueful face, to ask himself how any fellow could get on amid such drawbacks, to decide that proposing was a dreadful strain on the nerves, but to resolve his next attempt should be a success, if he had to inaugurate previously a series of private rehearsals. For although abashed and discomfited by his repeated failures to make his feelings understood, he was more in love than ever.

CHAPTER VI.

COLLAPSE OF THE ROMANCE.

"B M—B m—B m—N—N—N—Oh! where are you, N? Where is the little girl at B m—B m—B m?"

Such were the sounds that greeted Nattie's ears, as she entered the office the morning after her adventure with the love-lorn Quimby; and immediately she ceased to speculate on the probable embarrassment that must necessarily attend their not-to-be-avoided next meeting, and interrupted "C's" solitary conversation, by saying,

"What is the matter with you this morning? Here I am, N."

"G. M., my dear. I'm off, and wanted to say good-by before I went," responded "C."

"Off?" questioned Nattie, with a sudden fall in her mental temperature.

"Yes, I am going to a station five miles below to substitute, to-day. The operator there is obliged to go away, and couldn't find any one competent to do his work, and as there was a fellow that could do mine, he comes here and I go there."

"Oh, dear! what shall I do all day?" said Nattie, sinking into a chair, very much aggrieved.

"I am very sorry, but I couldn't well avoid accommodating him. But what will you do when I leave entirely, if you can't get along without me one day? happy I, to be so necessary to your existence!"

"But there is no prospect of your leaving at present, is there?" asked Nattie, forgetting in her alarm at such a possibility to challenge the last of his remark.

"There is some probability of it now," "C" responded. "I will tell you all about it to-morrow. I may come nearer to you; near enough even for you to see that twinkle."

"You don't mean you have a prospect of an office here in the city?" questioned Nattie, not knowing whether she would be glad or sorry if such were the case.

"Not exactly," replied "C." I haven't time to explain; train is coming, so——"

"Where did you say you were going to-day?" broke in Nattie quickly.

"B a—five miles down the line nearer you, but not on this wire. Used to be, you know, but switched on wire number twenty-seven last week," "C" responded so hurriedly, that Nattie could

hardly réad it, although so accustomed to his style of making his dots and dashes; for, with the key, as with the pen, all operators have their own peculiar manner of writing.

"Ah, yes! I remember," responded Nattie quickly. "That hateful operator signing 'M' had it, that used to be fighting for the circuit always, and breaking in when we were talking. I wouldn't have gone for him."

"Couldn't well avoid it. Here is train. Good-by; shall miss you terribly, but will be with you again to-morrow. Good-by."

"Good-by. I am lonesome already," Nattie answered.

As "C" made no reply, it was supposable he had gone, and probably had to run for the train, thought Nattie, as she took off her hat rather dejectedly.

A broken companionship of any kind must ever leave a certain sense of loneliness, and this was none the less true now on account of the unique circumstances. Indeed, until to-day she had not fully realized how necessary "C" had become to her telegraphic life. Naturally, she had woven a sort of romance about him who was a friend "so near and yet so far." Perhaps too, a certain yearning for tenderness in her lonely heart, a feeling that every woman knows, found something, very pleasant

in being always greeted with "Good morning, my dear," and hearing the last thing at night, "Good night, little girl at B m."

Miss Kling undoubtedly would have been shocked at being thus addressed even on the wire, by a strange person—a person certainly, although unseen; but Nattie, used to the license that distance gave, whether wisely or unwisely, had never thought it necessary to check the familiarity.

Pondering over what he had hinted about leaving permanently, in the leisure usually devoted to chatting with him, but which that day she hardly knew how to fill, Nattie wondered if, should they ever come face to face, they would feel like the old friends they were, or if the nearness would bring a constraint now unknown? Yet she was fain to confess she would like to see him and ascertain the personal appearance of one who occupied so much of her thoughts. But how strange it would be, if, after all their friendly talks and gay confidences, he should pass out of the way that was both their ways now, and they never know anything more about each other than that one was "C" and one was "N!" something not impossible either, or even improbable; for fate is a sort of switch-board, and a slight move will switch

two lives onto wires far asunder, even as the moving of a peg or two will alter everything on the board that shows its power so little.

With such thoughts in her mind, Nattie was rather among the shadows that day, and presented no laughing face to the curious passers-by, much to that opposite clerk's relief, who came to the conclusion that she had once more recovered her senses.

About an hour before the time for closing the office, as she was counting over her cash, and thinking how glad she was that "C" would be back to-morrow, she became conscious of some one waiting her attention outside, and went forward, scarcely looking at him, expecting, of course, a message. But instead, the individual, who filled the air with a suffocating odor of musk, asked,

"You are the regular operator here, I suppose?"

With a start Nattie looked up, expecting a complaint, an occurrence often prefaced by some like question, and scrutinizing him more particularly, saw a short, rather stout young man, possessing an air of cheap assurance, hair that insisted on being red, notwithstanding the bear's grease that covered it, teeth all at variance with each other, and seeming to rejoice obtrusively in the fact, and light blue eyes of a most insinuating expression, trimmed around with red.

"Yes," Nattie replied as she took this survey. "I am."

"You don't know me, I suppose?" was the next question.

"No," Nattie replied with a glance at the large mock diamond pin, and immense imitation amethyst ring he wore; "I certainly do not."

"I think you are mistaken about that," he rejoined, smiling at her in a most unpleasantly familiar manner.

Surprised and offended, Nattie drew back haughtily. "I think, rather, you are mistaken," she said, stiffly. "May I inquire your business?"

With an air of easy confidence and familiar remonstrance, he replied,

"Come, now, don't freeze a fellow; why, I came to see you. That's my business and no other!"

"He is drunk," thought Nattie, indignantly, but before she could reply he added,

"I am an operator, you see."

"Oh!" said Nattie, comprehensively, but not at all delightedly, for operator or no operator, and notwithstanding the sort of freemasonry between those of the craft, she preferred his room to his company. But constraining herself, she added as civilly as possible, "Did you wish to send a message, or speak to any one on the wire?"

"No, thank you," he answered; then, with an insinuating smile,

"Can't you guess who I am?"

"I really can't," Nattie replied, coldly and indifferently; thinking, "some of the operators down town, I suppose, and a delightful set they are if he is a specimen! So impertinent of him!"

"Can't you?" laughing and displaying his obtrusive teeth to their utmost advantage. "Now just think of some one you have been buzzing lately, and then guess, won't you, N?"

Without the least suspicion Nattie shook her head impatiently, feeling very much disgusted, and longing for some interruption to occur. But his next words were startling. Leaning forward very confidentially, he asked with a smile of consciousness,

"Do you see that twinkle, N?"

"What!" ejaculated Nattie—so forcibly that a passing countryman stopped with a peanut half cracked, to stare—and clutching at an umbrella hanging by her side, for support, she turned a horror-stricken face to the questioner, who, looking as if he expected her to be enraptured, added,

"You know a fellow that signs 'C,' don't you?"

The bump of self-conceit must have largely overbalanced the perceptive faculties of this obnoxious

young man, if he could possibly mistake the expression on Nattie's face for rapture, as, frantically grasping the umbrella, she gasped,

"No—no—it can't be—you are not—not—"

"Not C? Ain't I, though!" laughed the proprietor of the ring, pin, bear's-grease, et cetera.

"But," said poor Nattie, clinging desperately to hope and the umbrella, "C said this morning he was going to B a—and——"

"That was a trick to take you by surprise," he interrupted, with great enjoyment of his own words. "I knew I was coming here, all the time, but I wanted to give you a nice little surprise. Think I have, eh?" and he laughed again, and winked with almost vulgar assurance.

Nattie let go of hope and the umbrella, and collapsed with her romance into a chair; and she thought of Quimby's warning about the "soiled invisible," and barely suppressed a groan. Involuntarily she stole a glance at this too-visible person, and shuddered. Could she reconcile "C," her visionary, interesting, witty and gentlemanly "C" of the wire, with this musk-scented being of greasy red hair, cheap jewelry and vulgar manners? Impossible!

"It is the nightmare! it cannot be!" she thought, with the despairing refuge in dreams we often take when suddenly overwhelmed with terrible realities.

As she made no reply to his last observation, her visitor, glancing at her as if slightly puzzled by her behavior, went on—

"I did not think you would be so bashful, after all our talks. *I* am not,"—a fact hardly necessary to mention. "We ought to be pretty good friends by this time. Say, do I look as you expected I would?" and as if to give her a better view, he pushed his hat back on his head, a kindness wholly unappreciated, as Nattie had seen more than sufficient of him already.

"Not—not exactly!" she stammered, in a sort of dazed way.

"I believe you thought I was one of those slim fellows whose bones rattle when they walk, didn't you? I am no such a fellow, you see. But you ain't a bit as I imagined. May I be a plug * forever if you are!"

Nattie was too wretched, too unable even yet to realize that her "C" and this odious creature were one and the same, to ask, as he evidently expected natural curiosity would induce her to do, in what way she so differed from the person of his imagination.

"You go beyond all my calculations," he con-

* "Plug" is the common telegraphic expression for an incompetent operator.

tinued, flatteringly, after waiting in vain for a question from her; "Only you are more bashful than I supposed you would be, after the dots and dashes we have slung. But then it's easier to buzz on the wire than it is to talk, isn't it? For all a fellow has to do is to take up a book or a paper, pick things out to say, and go it without exercising his own brains!"

At these words, that explained the previous incomprehensible difference between the distant "C" and present person, the realization of the companionship, the romance, the friendship gone to wreck on this reef of musk and bear's-grease came over Nattie with a rush, and for a moment so affected her that she could hardly restrain her tears. And yet, after all, was not "C," *her* "C," the "C" whom she knew by his conversation only—"picked out of books!"—an unreal, intangible being, and not this so different person who claimed his identity?

"I think we astonished some of them on the wire with all the stuff we had over!" went on with his monologue the knight of the collapsed romance, who, not being troubled with fine sensibilities, had no idea of the feelings under which she was laboring.

"Yes—I—doubtless!" stammered Nattie, and

turned very red, as, suddenly remembering the tenor of some of what he so elegantly termed "stuff," the appalling thought, what if he should say "my dear?" presented itself in all its horrors, and the idea punished her for that girlish imprudence in allowing the familiarity from afar.

Evidently he noticed the access of color, and attributed it to his own fascinations, for he smiled complacently as he said,

"I wish I had longer to stay with you, but my train goes in five minutes." Nattie breathed a sigh of relief. "Too bad, isn't it? But I will come again some time! By the way," a cunning expression that seemed uncalled-for crossing over his face, "don't say anything on the wire about my being here to-day, will you? I don't want any one to know. Let them think I was at B a."

"Certainly not!" replied Nattie, with an alacrity born of the knowledge that she should hold no further communication of any kind with him; then, in order to give a hint of her intentions, she added, bracing herself up to mention what was so difficult to speak of to this vampire who mocked her with her vanished "C."

"Now that the—the mystery is solved, and I—and we have met, I don't think there will be much amusement in talking over the wire."

Somewhat to her surprise, and not at all flattering to her vanity, he answered, without a remonstrance,

"No! I don't know as there will!"

"Perhaps he doesn't like my looks any better than I do his!" was Nattie's natural and indignant thought at this quiet reception of her hint. And if anything had been necessary—which it certainly was not—to her utter repudiation of him, this would have sufficed for the purpose.

"You mentioned this morning you thought of leaving X n. Do you expect to go soon?" she asked, catching at the idea that a few hours ago had caused so much alarm, with a hope that he might be about to vanish from her world finally and forever. But even as she spoke, the difference of the now and then smote her like a pain.

"Did I say that?" he said, with a look that she could not understand, as if for some secret reason, he was so well pleased with himself, he could hardly avoid laughing outright. "Oh! well! I was only fooling!"

Nattie's face fell, but, catching at the opportunity to convey the impression that in her opinion they had not been very friendly, after all, she said,

"I suppose no one really means what they say on the wire. I am sure *I* do not!"

"But we mean what we say now," he replied, with an insinuating smile. "Next time I come we will be more sociable. But we have had a nice talk, ain't we?"

For a moment the repulsive person before her overcame the remembrance of the lost "C," and Nattie replied, sarcastically,

"I trust the talk has not been too much of an exercise for your brain!"

He looked at her doubtfully, and then laughed. "You are sort of a queer girl, ain't you? I wish though, I could stay and buzz you longer, but I have only time to get my train, so good-by."

"Good-by," said Nattie, betraying all her relief at his departure in the sudden animation of her voice, something so different from her preceding manner that he could but notice it, and he turned, looked at her, as if a suspicion of its true cause penetrated his mind at last, frowned, and then with that former look she did not understand crossing his face, nodded and ran for the depot, coming into violent collision with a fat Dutchman, looking perplexedly for a barber's shop. And thus the red hair, the bear's grease, the sham jewelry, and the obtrusive, fighting teeth disappeared forever from

Nattie's sight, leaving her with a bewildered look on her face, as if, indeed, just awakened from that imagined nightmare.

She looked around the office blankly. Everything was there just as usual, the little key and the sounder, over which had come all "C's" pleasant talk. "C!" That creature! The odor of his detestable musk hovered about her even now, but not yet could she realize that her "C" was no more.

CHAPTER VII.

"GOOD-BY."

IT was a very long face that Nattie carried to the Hotel Norman that night; so long that Miss Kling at once saw that something was amiss, and while curiously wondering as to the cause, took a grim satisfaction in the fact. For Miss Kling liked not to see cheerful faces; why should others be happy when she had not found her other self?

Nattie's first act on gaining her own room was to drag forth that carefully-preserved pen and ink sketch, and tear it to atoms, annihilating the chubby Cupid with especial care.

"And now," she thought to herself savagely, as she burned up the pieces, "I never will be interested in people again, unless I know all about them. Imagination is too dangerous a guide for me!"

Having thus exterminated the illustrated edition of her romance, Nattie felt the necessity of unburdening her mind, her sorrow not being too deep for words, and with that object sought Cyn; a proceeding much disapproved of by Miss Kling, who, knowing well that weakness of human nature that seeks a friendly bosom wherein to repose its sorrows, rightly surmised her lodger's destination and design, and decidedly objected to any one knowing more than she herself did.

Nattie found her friend at home, but to her vexation, not alone. With her was Quimby, who had called in the untold hope of gleaning tidings of the young lady who had—as he said to himself—floored him. His confusion at the sight of her, remembering as he did the somewhat unusual circumstances of their last meeting, was indescribable; indeed, his knees actually knocked together. Nattie, however, whose latest experience had effaced the effect, and almost the remembrance of that former one, bade him good-evening, without the least trace of consciousness or embarrassment, a composure of

manner that astounded but at the same time filled him with admiration.

As he did not take his departure, being, in fact, unable to tear himself away, Nattie, in her anxiety to tell Cyn all that was in her mind, and reflecting that he really was of no consequence—an argument not flattering to its object, but one that he probably would have been first to indorse had he known it—and, moreover, that he already knew the prologue, disregarded his presence and said,

"The most incomprehensible thing has happened, Cyn! I cannot realize it even now!"

Quimby quaked in his boots, and grew hot all over with the fear that she was going to relate their last evening's adventure. Could it be possible?

"I knew that something was the matter the moment you entered the room," said Cyn. "I cannot imagine why you should look as if you were going into the grave-digging business!"

"Ah, Cyn!" exclaimed Nattie, as if the words hurt her, "He—'C,' called on me to-day!"

Quimby gave a bounce, and then grew limp in all his joints.

"Is it possible? Personally?" questioned Cyn, with great interest and animation; then glancing at Nattie's face, her tone changed as she added, "He was not what you thought! I understand, poor Nat!"

Quimby straightened himself up. He fancied he saw a gleam of hope ahead.

"Far enough from what I thought!" replied Nattie, with a mixture of pathos and disgust. "Why did he not remain invisible?" then, in a burst of disappointment—"Cyn, he is simply awful! All red hair and grease, musk, cheap jewelry, and insolent assurance!"

Quimby glanced in the opposite glass, and his face brightened all over. He felt like a new man!

"Oh, dear! Is it as bad as that?" said Cyn, looking dismayed. "He was so entertaining on the wire, I can hardly believe it. Are you quite sure it was 'C'?"

"I could not realize it myself, but it is a fact nevertheless," Nattie answered sorrowfully, and then related what she termed the "disgusting details." Cyn listened, vexed and sorry, for she too had become interested in the invisible "C," but Quimby found it impossible to restrain his joy at this complete overthrow of one whom he had ever considered a formidable rival.

"It is no use to talk about romance in real life!" said the annoyed Cyn, yielding to the conviction that the obnoxious visitor really was "C," as Nattie concluded. "It is nice to read about,

and to enact on the stage, but it's altogether too unreliable for our solid, every-day world. Well, dear!" consolingly, "it's better to know the truth than to have gone on blindly talking to so undesirable an acquaintance!"

"Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise," quoted Nattie, with a shrug of her shoulders. "But—yes—I suppose I—ought to be glad I know the worst."

"I—I beg pardon, but I—I think I hinted it might be as it has proved, you know!" said Quimby, trying not to look triumphant, and failing signally.

Not particularly pleased at having his superior discernment thus pointed out, Nattie replied rather shortly,

"It was luck and chance anyway, and it was my luck to stumble on the most disagreeable specimen in the business. That is all."

"Do you suppose he is aware of the impression he produced on you?" asked Cyn.

"No, indeed!" Nattie replied scornfully. "Is there anything so blind as vulgar, ignorant, self-conceit? I have no doubt he thinks I was charmed!"

"Then how will you manage when he wants to talk on the wire again?" asked Cyn.

"I shall have to make excuses until he takes the hint. Oh, dear!" said Nattie with a sigh, "I believe it is impossible to get any comfort out of this world!"

"Oh, no, it isn't!" said Cyn in her bright cheery manner. "The way to do is not to allow ourselves to fret over what we cannot help. I am almost as disappointed as you, dear, over this total collapse of what opened so interestingly; but the curtain has fallen on the ignominious last act of our little drama, so farewell—a long farewell to our wired romance!"

As Cyn spoke, the somewhat unmusical voice of Jo Norton was heard in the hall, singing an air from a popular burlesque, followed by the appearance among them of Jo himself. Of course the whole story had to be related for his benefit, and very little sympathy did Nattie receive from him.

"Let this teach you a lesson, young lady!" he said, with mock solemnity, "namely, Attend to your business and let romance alone!"

"As you do!" said Cyn.

"As I do," he echoed, "and consequently be happy as I am! I tell you, romance and sentiment and love, and all that bosh, are at the bottom of two-thirds of all the misery in the world!"

Notwithstanding which sage remark, and the fact

of the curtain having fallen on the end, as Cyn said, for a moment yesterday was as if it had never been, when Nattie entered her office the next morning and was greeted with the familiar,

"B m—B m—B m—where is my little girl at B m, to say good-morning to me?" and she made an involuntary movement towards the key to respond in the usual way.

The remembrance of the actual state of things checked her just in time, and then, with a rather uncertain and tremulous touch of the key she answered,

"Good morning! wait—am busy!"

"One untruth!" she thought to herself, as "C" became mute, "not the only one I shall have to tell, I fear, before I succeed in conveying my exact meaning to the understanding of—the person. I will pick a quarrel, if possible, and he persists in talking! Oh, dear! I could have endured the red hair, even those dreadful teeth, had it not been for the bear's-grease and general vulgarity of the creature. Well, it's all over now!" and she sighed, from which it may be inferred that Jo's admonitions had not been of much consolation to her.

We do not take the lessons our experience teaches us, to heart immediately; first, their bitterness must be overcome.

To Nattie's great relief, the wire happened to be

very busy that morning, but whenever it was possible "C" called her, and called in vain.

Immediately after her return from dinner, however, having just received and signed for a message, "C," the moment she closed her key, said,

"Where have you been to-day? are you not glad to have me back again? it cannot be I am so soon forgotten?"

Unable to avoid answering, Nattie responded on the wrong side of truth again. "Have been busy; wait, please, a customer here."

"I cannot help saying, confound the luck!" "C" responded, savagely. To which anathema Nattie turned up her nose scornfully, and made no reply.

The nervous dread of his "calling," that was upon her all day, caused her to make more blunders than she had ever done in all her telegraphic career. She gave wrong change continually, numbered her messages incorrectly, and "broke" so much that the operator who sent to her had a headache with ill-humor. Usually very quick at deciphering the illegible scrawls often handed her for transmission, she to-day was frowned at for her stupidity in making them out; and one lady to whom a message was sent through poor Nattie's office, was much exercised on receiving it, to learn over an unknown gentleman's signature, that he would be with her at

midnight. He really was her husband, but Nattie had transmitted the name the writing looked most like, which was one very remote from the real one.

All these mistakes she laid at "C's" door, and grew more disgusted with him, accordingly, especially when she counted her cash, and found herself a dollar short. She managed, however, by frequent excuses, to get along without holding any conversation with him until the latter part of the afternoon, when, the wire not being in use, and business slacking up, he called persistently, savagely, and entreatingly—all of which phases can be expressed in dots and dashes—interspersing the call with such expressions as,

"Please answer, N! Where are you, N? Why will you treat thus a poor fellow who thinks so much of you?"

"I should think he might take a hint! Must I tell him in plain words that a personal inspection leads me to decline the honor of farther acquaintance? when, too, he particularly requested me not to mention his visit, over the wire?" thought Nattie; and then, as he continued to call, she arose impatiently, and answered shortly,

"B m!"

"You naughty little girl!" immediately responded "C," "where have you been all day? Is it

thus you treat me on my return, when I expected you would be glad to see me again?"

"I have been busy," Nattie replied briefly, with a repetition of her platitude, and cringing at the same time over the first of his remark, as she recalled his *tout ensemble.*

"So you have said every time I have called," "C" answered, apparently entirely unconscious of the possible reason. "What is the cause? You never used to be busy *always*, you know!"

"How different he is on the wire from what he is in reality!" thought Nattie, with a return of her first disappointment, "and how hard it is to merge the two in one!" But she answered,

"There is a first time for everything; besides, I have not felt like talking to-day."

"Not with me?" queried "C."

"No!" replied Nattie briefly, and to the point.

"C" held his key open a moment.

"I do not understand it," he said at last. "It isn't possible that I have done anything to offend you?"

"Only offended me with the sight of you!" thought Nattie; but unwilling to be really impolite, replied, "Certainly not!"

"You are not angry about yesterday, are you?" pursued "C."

"Certainly not," repeated Nattie, adding to herself, "A faint idea that I did not exactly fall in love with you is creeping into your red head, is it?"

"If I have done anything, I beg you to tell me what, for I am ignorant of it, and I assure you I am penitent, and that I forgive you!" continued "C," "only please don't be cross to me!"

Nattie saw her opportunity for picking a quarrel, and seized it.

"I do not know what you mean by my being cross!" she said. "I am sure I was not aware that I was obliged to talk to any one unless I felt like it. I am not in the mood to-day, and I will not be forced. You have no right to call me cross, and when I am in the humor to talk with you again I will let you know!"

"Very well!" "C" replied promptly, undoubtedly angry himself now; "I will wait your pleasure!" and then was mute.

"It has not been quite so gradual as I intended, but I think I have effectually settled the matter, and my mind is relieved," thought Nattie; yet she sighed, and her satisfaction was followed by depression, for with "C" departed the pleasantest part of her office life, a fact she could not disguise. In the week that followed, when "C," true to his word,

waited, saying nothing, she missed continually the sympathy, the gay talk, the companionship that had made the constantly-occurring annoyances endurable, and the days that dragged so now seem short. The office business did not fill half her time, and the constant confinement began to be irksome to her, whose nature demanded activity; in consequence, she often grew impatient and answered unnecessary questions of customers with a shortness that gave considerable offence; and had it not been for Cyn, who brought her sunny presence quite often into the office, heedless of the "no admittance" on the door, the monotony that had now displaced the romantic side of telegraphy would have plunged Nattie among the shadows almost constantly.

Of course the sudden cessation of the intimacy between "C" and "N" was a theme of much surprise and bantering comments along the line, especially from "Em." But these facetious remarks gradually became fewer as the wonder subsided. One day, nearly two weeks after the "collapse," Nattie was surprised to hear the old familiar "B m—B m—B m—X n." Wondering if he had grown tired of waiting and was about to attempt a renewal of their former friendship, Nattie rather impatiently answered. But it proved he had a message, an occurrence quite infrequent with him. This he

sent without unnecessary words. But after she had given " O. K." and closed her key, he opened his to say,

" Please, don't you want to make up, N ?"

" I have nothing to make up !" Nattie replied.

" O. K." was " C's " response as he again subsided.

" He snubs easily !" thought Nattie, much relieved.

The following Saturday night, however, as she was taking in from the shelf outside the blanks, ink, and bad pens that excited the ire of irascible customers, preparatory to closing, " C " once more called. With a devout hope that he was not going to be annoying, Nattie answered.

" Notwithstanding the late coolness between us, which was not my fault, and for which I cannot account——" he began, and then some one with a rush message broke in.

" What is he coming at now I wonder—he commenced with a great display of words," thought Nattie curiously ; and then with a little curl of her lip, " a sentence out of some book, I suppose."

But as soon as the wire was quiet she said,

" To ' C.' Please g a—account."

" I could not leave, as I am about to do to-night, without saying good-by, in remembrance of our former pleasant intercourse," concluded " C."

"You mean you are leaving permanently?" queried Nattie, surprised.

"Yes, this is my last day here. Monday I leave town; and so, with much regret that anything unpleasant should have interrupted our acquaintance—although what it was I assure you I do not know, since you deign me no explanation—I will say, not as I would once, *au revoir*, but good-by."

"Good-by," answered Nattie, forgetting for the moment everything but "C," the old "C," the "C" who had enlivened so many hours, and about whom had dwelt that romantic mystery. "Good-by. Believe me, I shall always remember the many social talks we have enjoyed."

"Possibly we might enjoy them again, if you desired," "C" said then, as if he gave her a chance for explanation or to express such a wish.

But Nattie, recalling now the bears-grease, the musk, the cheap jewelry and their obnoxious possessor, answered only,

"Good-by."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FEAST.

PONDERING discontentedly over the perplexities of life, a habit she had allowed herself to indulge in quite frequently of late, one day not long after the final exit of the once interesting but now obnoxious "C," Nattie suddenly became aware of a pair of merry brown eyes, belonging to a fine-looking young gentleman, observing her critically, and with apparently no intention of discontinuing their scrutiny. At which, in her present state of temper, Nattie turned very red and very angry. "I am not on exhibition," she thought, indignantly, and rising majestically, went towards him with the curt inquiry,

"Did you wish to send a message, sir?"

The young gentleman hesitated, and appeared slightly embarrassed, but did not take his eyes from her face, nevertheless.

"I merely wished to ask the tariff to Washington," he replied, at length.

"Forty cents," Nattie answered, shortly.

"Thank you," he said, but without moving, and

after a moment, as if desirous of opening a conversation, he continued, smiling, "I hardly think I will send a message to-day ; I presume you will not object to being spared the trouble?"

Nattie, having been quarreling all day with intangible somethings, was rather glad than otherwise to find a real object upon which she could vent the unamiability resulting from her surplus discontent. The young man's evident desire to talk more than circumstances warranted, was displeasing to her, and she rejoined very stiffly,

"It is a matter of perfect indifference to me," and turned away.

With an amused smile, he looked at the back thus presented to his view, opened his lips to speak, hesitated, and finally walked away. Nattie, looking after him out of the corners of her eyes, saw him glance back as he opened the door, and had a remorseful feeling that perhaps she had been crosser to him than he really deserved, for he was certainly very fine-looking. But what was done could not be undone, and with no expectation of ever seeing him again, she dismissed the matter from her mind.

The best, perhaps the only really pleasant part of Nattie's life now, was her evenings, passed almost invariably with Cyn. Indeed, Cyn seemed to be a magnet, around which all gathered—Quimby, al-

though, of course, Cyn herself was not his chief attraction—Celeste Fishblate, who determinedly pushed herself into an intimacy, and Jo Norton, who, had it not been for the fact so loudly proclaimed by himself, of his having no sentiment in his soul, would have been suspected of being on the road to falling in love with Cyn, so strangely was he attracted to her company. But this, of course, was impossible for *him!*

"That will not do, dear," Cyn remarked, when Nattie related her little adventure with the young gentleman. "Do you know you have been in a dreadful state of mind ever since 'C' intruded his personality?"

Nattie colored a little as she replied, discontentedly, "Oh, it isn't *that*, I assure you; the truth is, I am ambitious, Cyn. I suppose I forgot it, slightly, while I was so interested in 'C;' but I cannot be content with a mere working on from day to day, in the same old routine, and nothing more."

Cyn looked at her scrutinizingly, as she asked, "But in what particular way are you ambitious? to be rich, or what?"

"Oh! not for money!" Nattie answered, with a slight contempt for that necessary and convenient article. "I am ambitious for fame! I want to be a writer; but when I think of the obstacles in my way,

to an opening, even, in that direction, I am daunted. I have attacks of energy, it is true, but I fear it is fitful ; it comes and goes."

"I understand," Cyn replied, with more than wonted seriousness. "Your ambition is great enough to render you useless and discontented, but you need something to stimulate your energy, else it will waste itself in idle dreams. Perhaps love may come to be that motive power; perhaps—" and a shade crossed her sunny face—"some great disappointment."

There was a moment's silence, Nattie pondering thoughtfully on these words ; and then Cyn continued,

"But in the meantime, since you can at present accomplish nothing, why not get all the enjoyment you can out of life, as it goes? So, when the opportunity comes, and you seize it, you will not have to look back on years wasted in vain longings for the then unattainable. *That* is my philosophy—and I, too, am ambitious."

"Your philosophy is cheery, at least," said Nattie, smiling. "But I am afraid it is very hard for ambitious people to take life easy : and that is not all of my troubles," she continued, gayly, "I can't get anything good to eat !"

"Poor child," said Cyn, with mock seriousness.

"this *is* coming from the sublime to the ridiculous. What is the cause of the lamentable fact?"

"Oh! I am so tired of both boarding-houses and restaurants. In the former they never have what one likes—and ah! such steak!—while in the latter you have to pick out all the cheap dishes, or ruin yourself at a meal."

Cyn laughed.

"I assure you I can appreciate your feelings, from sad experience! I, myself, am positively longing for a nice sirloin steak." Then, a sudden thought striking her, "I will tell you what we will do, Nat, we will have a little feast!"

"A feast?" repeated Nattie, not exactly comprehending.

"Yes—I have a little gas stove—low be it said, lest Mrs. Simonson hear and bring in a terrific bill for extra gas!—I use it sometimes to cook my dinner, when I do not feel like going out, and why should we not have a feast all to ourselves some day? and the sirloin steak shall be forthcoming! and what do you say to Charlotte Russe? In short, we will have everything we can think of, and you shall be assistant cook!"

"That would be splendid!" cried Nattie, delighted, "only it will have to be some Sunday, as that is my only leisure day, you know."

"All the better, for then we will be less liable to intrusion," responded Cyn, gayly. "So make a memorandum to that effect, for next week. We must not let Mrs. Simonson know, however, on account of the gas stove; I pay her too much rent now. I am afraid we shall have a little difficulty about dishes. The few I have are not exactly real Sévres china, or even decently conventional. But——"

"Oh! never mind the dishes!" interrupted Nattie. "Anything will do! I have myself a cracked tumbler, and a spoon, that will perhaps be useful for something."

Agreeing therefore to hold dishes in strict contempt, the following Sunday found the two girls with closed doors, in the midst of great preparations for a truly Bohemian feast, as Cyn termed it; Nattie with her crimps tied down in a blue handkerchief, and Cyn with her sleeves rolled up, and an old skirt of a dress doing duty as apron.

"Let me see," said Nattie merrily, taking account of stock. "Two pounds of steak—the first cut of the sirloin, I think you said?—waiting, expectant of making glad our hearts, on the rocking-chair, potatoes in plebeian lowliness under the table, tomatoes and two pies on your trunk, Charlotte Russes—delicious Charlotte Russes—where? Ah!

—on your bonnet-box, in a plate ordinarily used as a card receiver, and sugar, butter, et cetera, and et cetera lying around almost anywhere, and the figs, oranges and homely, but necessary bread, where are they? I see, on top of 'Dombey & Son!'"

"And our dishes will not quarrel, because they are none of them any relation to each other!" laughed Cyn, as she peeled the tomatoes. "I fear goblets will have to take upon themselves the duties of cups, and that cracked tumbler of yours must be used for something. I am sorry that saucepan is so dilapidated, but it is the best I own!"

"And in that saucepan we must both boil the potatoes and stew the tomatoes. Won't one cool while the other is doing?" queried Nattie, hovering lovingly over the steak.

"I think not;" Cyn answered. "You won't mind the coffee being boiled in a tin can, once the repository of preserved peaches, will you?"

"Ah, no!" replied Nattie emphatically, and sawing at the steak with a very dull knife, without a handle. "It will be just as good when it's poured out."

"I had a coffee-pot once, but I melted the nose off and forgot to buy another yesterday," Cyn said, putting on the potatoes.

"We will call our contrivance a coffee-urn; it

sounds aristocratic," suggested Nattie, as she cleared the books from the least shaky table, and spread it with three towels, in lieu of a table-cloth. "But what shall we do for plates to put the pies on?"

"Take those two wooden box covers in the closet," promptly responded Cyn. "That is right, and see, here is room also for the coffee—pardon me, I had almost said commonplace coffee-pot!"

"But the tomato! what *can* we pour that in?" suddenly exclaimed Nattie, with great concern.

Cyn scanned every object in the room with dismay.

"The—the wash-bowl!" she insinuated at last, determined not to be daunted.

"Don't you think it rather large? to say nothing of its being too suggestive?" said Nattie, laughing.

Cyn did not press the point, but shook her head, dubiously.

"I have it!" cried Nattie, "there is a fruit-dish in my room."

"Just the thing!" interrupted Cyn ecstatically, "I will run and bring it, if you will attend to the cooking."

"Look out for Miss Kling," said Nattie, warningly; "if she catches a glimpse of you making off with my fruit-dish, she will never rest until she finds out everything."

"Rely on me for secrecy and dispatch," said Cyn,

going. "If she sees me, I will mention nuts and raisins; merely mention them, you know."

But Miss Kling, for once, was napping; perhaps dreaming of him Cyn called the Torpedo—Celeste's father—and she obtained the dish, reached her own door again without being seen by any one except the Duchess, and was congratulating herself on her good luck, when suddenly, like an apparition, Quimby stood before her.

Cyn started, murmured something about "oranges," slipped the soap-dish she had also confiscated into her pocket, and tried to make the big fruit-dish appear as small as possible.

She might, however, have spared herself any uneasiness, for this always the most unobservant of mortals, was too much overburdened with some affair of his own, to notice even a two-quart dish.

"Oh! I—I beg pardon, I—I was coming with a a—request to your room," he said eagerly. "I—would it be too much to—to bring a friend, he knows no one here, and I am sure he and you would fraternize at once, if I might bring him, you know."

"Certainly—yes!" replied Cyn, too anxious to get away to pay much attention to his words, particularly as an odor of steak reached her nostrils.

"Thank you! I—I never knew any one who understood me as well as you!" he said with a grateful bow, and without more words, Cyn left him.

"How long you have been gone!" Nattie remarked, looking up, her cheeks very red, and her nose embellished with a streak of smut, as Cyn entered. "Did you see any one?"

"No one except Quimby, who stopped me to ask about bringing a friend to call some evening," Cyn replied, displaying the fruit, and producing the soap-dish.

"Mercy on us!" Nattie said, looking rather aghast, "it is rather large, isn't it? and what did you bring that soap-dish for?"

"I thought it might come handy," laughed Cyn. We will make a potato holder of it for the time. 'To what base uses may we come at last?'—Why—" in a tone of surprise, "here is the Duchess!"

And sure enough, up by the window sat that sagacious animal, winking and blinking complacently, and evidently determined to be a third in the feast.

"She came in unnoticed under the shadow that fruit-dish threw," said Nattie, teasingly.

Cyn shook an oyster fork at her threateningly.

"Say another such word and you shall have no

steak!" she said tragically, "instead, a dungeon shall be your doom. We will let the Duchess remain as a receiver of odds and ends. I suppose her suspicions were excited by the sight of these articles. A rare cat! a learned cat! now please set the table, for our feast will soon be prepared!" and Cyn bent over the sizzling steak, that emitted a most appetizing odor.

Setting that table was no such easy matter as might appear, for what with the big fruit-dish, wooden covers, different sizes of plates and other incongruous articles, considerable management was necessary.

"I shall have to put the sugar on in the bag," Nattie said, incautiously backing to view the general effect, and so stumbling over the saucepan of potatoes that sat on the floor, but luckily doing no damage.

"Ah, well! Eccentricity is quite the rage now, you know," responded the philosophical Cyn, "and certainly, a sugar-bowl so closely resembling a brown paper bag as not to be distinguishable from the real thing, is quite *rêcherchê*. But my dear Nat, where am I to set the steak if you have that big fruit-dish in the center of the table, taking up all the room?"

"I shall have to put it on the floor, then," Nattie answered, despairingly, "for I have tried it on all parts of the table! If you set it on the edge," she

added hastily, seeing Cyn about to do so, "you will tip the whole thing over!"

"Then we must have a side-board," Cyn announced, with a plate of steak in one hand, and the big fruit-dish in the other. "Put my writing-desk on a chair, please; spread a towel over it, and there you have it!"

"But what a quantity of eatables we have! Two pounds of steak, ten big potatoes, a two-quart dish of tomatoes, two large pies, two Charlotte Russes, an urn of coffee, a dozen oranges and a box of figs—good gracious! Think of two people eating all that!" exclaimed Nattie, decidedly dismayed at the prospect.

"It is considerable," Cyn confessed, surveying the array with a slightly daunted expression. "You see I am not used to buying for a family, and I was afraid of getting too little. But," brightening, "there isn't more than one quart of the tomatoes, and there are *three* of us, you know—the Duchess!"

"To be sure; I had forgotten her!" Nattie said, recovering her equanimity, and glancing at the purring animal, who was looking on approvingly, and evidently appreciated the difference between sirloin and her usual rations of round.

"Then let the revels commence, at once!" cried

Cyn, rolling down her sleeves, while Nattie wiped the smut from her face.

But now another difficulty presented itself; the chairs were all too low to admit of feasting with the anticipated rapture; this was soon overcome, however, by piling a few books in the highest chair, and appropriating the music-stool.

"Now for a feast," exclaimed Nattie, exultantly, as they sat down triumphant, and she brandished her very big knife and extremely small fork, while Cyn poured the coffee from the—urn; an undertaking attended with some difficulty, and requiring caution; and the Duchess looked on expectantly.

And then—the goal almost reached—upon their startled ears came a dreadful sound—the sound of a knock at the door!

Down to the ground went Nattie's knife and fork, the coffee-urn narrowly escaped a similar fate, up went the back of the Duchess, and two dismayed Bohemians and one impatient cat gazed at each other.

CHAPTER IX.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

"IT must be Miss Kling, overpowered by curiosity!" murmured Nattie.

"No!" answered Cyn in a stage whisper, "the knock is too timid. Good gracious! there it is again! Stand in front of the gas stove, Nat, lest it be Mrs. Simonson, while I go and invent some excuse for not letting in whoever it is."

And having given these hasty directions, Cyn opened the door the smallest possible crack. As she did so, and before she could speak, it was pushed back violently, almost knocking her over, and in burst Quimby. This, however, might not have much disconcerted them, as *he* could have been disposed of easily enough, had not at his heels came a tall, fine-looking young man, a perfect stranger to both Cyn and Nattie.

"You see I keep my word!" was the enigmatical remark the smiling Quimby made as he entered. Then, catching sight of the festive board, he stopped short and stared, with an utterly confounded face, at that, at the embarrassed Nattie, at Cyn, behind the door, and at the saucepan cover, which, embellished

with potato parings, occupied a prominent position in the middle of the floor.

His companion also paused, a surprised and amused smile lurking in his merry brown eyes as he looked at Nattie, seemingly regardless of anything else in the room.

Cyn was the first to recover from the general petrifaction, and with the involuntary thought, "what an excellent stage situation!" came from behind the door, where Quimby's impetuous entrance had thrust her, saying, with as much ease as she could possibly gather together,

"Don't be frightened at what you see, friend Quimby; we were only extemporizing a little feast, that is all. Will you join us?"

But Quimby only stared harder than ever; he was evidently struck speechless.

His companion, thus placed in the awkward position of an unintroduced intruder, withdrew his eyes from Nattie, took in the situation at a glance, and turning to Cyn, said, smiling,

"I think we owe you an apology for our intrusion; my friend Quimby, on whom I called to-day, in pity for my being a stranger in the city, kindly offered to introduce me to some friends of his. He informed me we were expected, but I fear we have made a mistake."

At this Quimby recovered his voice.

"No!" he cried, in stentorian tones, "it was not—I *cannot* have made a mistake this time, you know! Cyn"—looking at her reproachfully—"you knew about it! I met you a short time ago, and asked you—and you said we might come, you know!"

Half amazed and half amused, Cyn shook her head in denial, at which action Quimby started and turned pale.

"Why I—I beg pardon—but in the hall! you said, 'certainly,' you know!"

"Oh!" said Cyn, a light breaking in upon her, "I see, but I did not then understand you, I suppose;" rallying from her embarrassment, "my mind was so occupied with our feast, I was incapable of thinking of anything else; so please consider this an apology for the condition in which you find us, to yourself and your friend, whom, you will pardon me for reminding you, you have *not* introduced," and Cyn looking laughingly at the stranger, who also laughed.

"Oh! I—I beg pardon, I am sure, for—for all my stupidities. I—I am always doing something wrong, but I—I am used to it, you know," said the disconcerted Quimby; then wiping the perspiration from his forehead, he added clumsily, "my friend, Mr. Stanwood—Cyn—and Miss—Miss Rogers."

Mr. Stanwood gayly shook hands with Cyn,

whom Quimby had nervously forgotten to honor with a Miss, and then advanced to Nattie, who had not stirred from her position as screen for the gas stove, saying,

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Rogers."

And as Nattie accepted his proffered hand, in an embarrassed way, not yet being able to rise to the situation, and observed the peculiarly roguish expression with which he regarded her, she suddenly became aware that she had seen him on some previous occasion, but where she was utterly at loss to remember.

Cyn, too, was struck by something a little odd in his manner to Nattie, and glanced at him curiously, as she said in her most cordial tones,

"And now, gentlemen, as we have exchanged apologies all around, please be seated."

Quimby immediately bounced up from the music-stool, on which, in his agitation, he had involuntarily dropped.

"Oh, no!" he exclaimed hastily. "We—we did did not come to dinner, you know!"

Cyn smiled at Quimby's anxiety to disclaim intentions no one thought of attributing to him, and turning to Mr. Stanwood, asked, thereby greatly scandalizing Nattie,

"But supposing you were invited to stay and share our banquet, would you?"

"Were I sure the invitation was heartfelt, I should be sorely tempted; wouldn't you, Quimby?" Mr. Stanwood replied, easily.

Poor Quimby twirled his thumbs confusedly, and murmured something about leaving the ladies to enjoy their "feast" alone.

"We have eatables enough for six, as Nat was just now intimating," went on Cyn, who certainly had a touch of true Bohemianism in her composition, as well as Jo Norton. "But our dishes, 'ay, there's the rub,'" and she laughingly held up the coffee-urn, while the less adaptable Nattie thought apprehensively of the propensity of things to cool.

Undaunted by the urn, Mr. Stanwood said, with humorous wistfulness, but looking at Nattie,

"You won't force us to eat the dishes, will you? and that steak smells so nice, and I haven't had any dinner!"

"Then away with ceremony and sit down to the banquet!" said the reckless Cyn, regardless of the protest in Nattie's face; and truth to tell, the former young lady was not at all averse to this addition to their number.

And to the consternation of Quimby, and dismay of Nattie, and possibly a little to the surprise of

Cyn, Mr. Stanwood replied by seating himself down in a rocking-chair, and saying gayly,

"I feel positive that I am about to enjoy myself as I have not since I was a boy, and stole eggs, and cooked them on a flat rock behind my uncle's barn, and had raw turnip for dessert. Sit down, Quimby!"

Upon this Quimby, with a blushing protest against an intrusion, that did not seem to trouble his merry friend in the least, also sat down.

As he did so, Nattie screamed; but too late. On the crowning glory of the feast, on those enticing Charlotte Russes, crowded from the table on to a chair, there was Quimby!

"Bless my soul! what is the matter?" he asked, staring astounded at Nattie's scream, but still sitting there, entirely unconscious of the ruin he had wrought.

Cyn's anguish knew no bounds, as she saw what had happened.

"Get up!" she cried, wringing her hands, "can't you get up? good gracious! don't you know what you are sitting on?"

"Eh?" he queried, rising obediently, and looking at her with a blank expression. "Sitting on?" then following her frantic gesture, he turned and looked at the chair behind him, and instantly horror overspread his countenance.

"Bless my soul!" he gasped, turning round and round, trying to get a glimpse of his own coat-tails. "How did it come there? what is it?"

"It is—*was Charlotte Russe!*" said Nattie, in gloomy despair.

"*Charlotte Russe!*" echoed Quimby, still turning himself around like a revolving light. "It—it don't look much like it, you know!"

At this, Mr. Stanwood, who had with difficulty suppressed his laughter until now, burst into an uncontrollable roar, in which he was joined by Cyn, and then by Nattie. They laughed until utterly exhausted, Quimby all the time keeping up his rotatory motion, with a face whose lugubriousness cannot be described.

"I—I—bless my soul! I will replace what I have destroyed! I—I assure you, I will!" the unfortunate Quimby groaned, as soon as he could be heard. "I—what can I say, to express my sorrow—I—" and suddenly ceasing to revolve, he snatched Mr. Stanwood's hat, and started for the door.

"Where are you going!" his friend questioned as gravely as he could.

"More Charlotte Russes!" he responded incoherently, and with an agonized face.

"If I may be permitted to make a suggestion," said Mr. Stanwood with labored gravity, "I should

say, some little change in your toilet would be quite appropriate before going on the street, and moreover, that my hat will not fit your head!"

At this, Quimby dropped the hat he held as if it had been red-hot, glanced at the chair whereon he had so lately distinguished himself, took up the tails of his coat one in each hand, revolved again, and then without a word darted from the room.

As well as she could from laughing, Cyn called after him, telling him not to mind about getting the Charlotte Russes, and to hurry back, but he made no response.

"Poor Quimby!" said Mr. Stanwood, wiping the tears of excessive mirth from his eyes. "He is such a good fellow, it is too bad he always is in hot water."

"Yes," assented Cyn, removing the chair with the remains of what had been clinging to it from sight, Nattie following it with a somewhat rueful glance. "Shall we wait for him? I fear our dinner is getting cold."

"I don't think we had better," Nattie, who had long been filled with a similar presentiment, responded. "There is no knowing whether he will return or not, and it's no use in having everything spoiled."

"I do not think he will expect us to wait," Mr. Stanwood said.

"Well then," said Cyn, "here is a chair for you, Mr. Stanwood. It's all right, so you need not look before sitting. Luckily you are taller than we, and need no books to raise you. Now the question is, what shall we give you to eat from? Ah! here is the bread plate! Nat, can't you find another wooden cover? No? Then spread a piece of brown paper over 'Scribner's.' How fortunate we have an extra knife and fork; you don't mind their being oyster forks? I thought not! Nat and I will use the same spoon, so you can have a whole one. Nat, you and I will have to drink from that cracked tumbler."

"Allow me," interrupted Mr. Stanwood. "Do you know," solemnly, "a cracked tumbler is and always was the height of my ambition."

"Well then, we are all right!" said the jovial Cyn. "But I fear," she added, helping to steak, "if Quimby comes before we finish, he will have to go foraging for his own dishes!"

Mr. Stanwood was praising the steak, which he certainly ate as if the admiration was genuine, when a timid rap announced Quimby's reappearance on the scene. In complete change of raiment, smelling like a field of new-mown hay, and figuratively clothed in sackcloth and ashes, he entered.

"I—I beg pardon," he said, looking not at those

he addressed, but humbly at the Duchess, who had been walking the floor impatiently and indignantly, but was now contentedly chewing. "I—I assure you I shall be delighted to go out and get Charlotte Russes to replace those I so wantonly destroyed. Will you—may I be allowed?"

"Not on any account," said Cyn, quickly. "Besides, the stores are closed to-day."

"So they are, so they are!" he exclaimed, putting his hand to his head dejectedly.

"But we can exist without Charlotte Russes, I think," Nattie said. She had quite recovered her good humor, and was reconciled even to Mr. Stanwood's company; indeed, had secretly confessed he was really an acquisition. Such is the power of good beefsteak!

"Some other time we will talk about it," Cyn said. "And now, we must improvise you a cup, plate, knife, fork, and spoon. I know you must be hungry after your exploit."

Quimby blushed.

"I—you shall have fifty Charlotte Russes to-morrow!" he ejaculated. "But the articles you mention—I—have in my room, and will bring them. You see I—sometimes have a little private lunch myself, you know," and departing, he in a moment returned with his dinner accouterments, which Cyn

commanded him to put down at once, lest he demolish them.

"Let me see," she added, as he meekly deposited his burden on the nearest piece of furniture—which happened to be the piano. "I can make room for you here, next me, I think."

"No! no!" he exclaimed quickly; "if you will be so kind, I—I would rather sit on that little stool in the corner, where I can do no damage, you know!"

"Oh! we must not make a martyr of you!" laughed Nattie, as she cut a pie with a very dull knife, which caused the very unsteady table to shake, so that every one's coffee slopped over.

"No, indeed; there is plenty of room here," added Mr. Stanwood, steadying his cracked tumbler. But Quimby shook his head.

"Now, really—I—I shall feel much more comfortable if I may—if you will allow me to sit on the stool. I—I am used to it, you know! 'Pon my word, I—I mean all right, but some way I always make a mess of it!"

Cyn would have remonstrated further, but Mr. Stanwood said, "We had better let him be happy in his own way; I suppose he will not be easy unless we do!"

And so Quimby, much to his satisfaction, was

allowed to eat his share of the feast on a low stool, in the corner, like a naughty school-boy.

Visitors were destined to be numerous to-day, for hardly had Quimby been served, when a knock at the door was followed by the appearance of Jo, who tip-toed into the room, and in a mysterious whisper, said,

"I saw Quimby enter this room, bearing utensils that could only be used for one purpose! I smelt a savory odor! and here I am!"

"And welcome, too!" said Cyn, laughing; "come, sit here by me. Are you and Mr. Stanwood acquainted?"

"Oh, yes!" replied Jo, perching himself on the arm of a rocking-chair close to Cyn, and appropriating a wooden cover for a plate as he spoke. "He and Quimby did me the honor to call on me to-day, but left for metal more attractive—whether the dinner or you ladies, I will not pretend to say!"

"It was we ladies, you dreadful matter-of-fact creature!" said Nattie. "Their presence at the dinner was quite accidental; Cyn and I started out for a little quiet feast, and behold the result! Bohemian enough for even you, isn't it, Jo?"

"Exactly what I like!" replied Jo—and very close indeed to Cyn had Jo managed to get, but then the table was very small—"But the idea of you two

girls proposing to selfishly enjoy such a feast all alone!"

"I begin to think we did make a mistake, in not making preparations for, and inviting a larger party," acquiesced Cyn.

"I wonder if Miss Rogers has overcome her anger towards offending me?" questioned Mr. Stanwood, looking at her roguishly, as she helped him to a second piece of pie.

"My anger towards you?" repeated Nattie, coloring.

"Yes; you did not want me to accept Miss Archer's most kind invitation, and remain; now confess, did you?" he asked, laughing.

Nattie was rather embarrassed at this instance of the young gentleman's perceptive faculties, and not exactly able to refute the charge, was somewhat at loss how to reply.

"I—I do not get acquainted quite so easily as Cyn," she stammered.

"Except on the wire!" Cyn added.

"Except on the wire," repeated Nattie, with a smile; then meeting the curious glance of Mr. Stanwood, it suddenly flashed upon her that he was the same young gentleman who had called at the office, and inquired about the tariff to Washington, for the sole object of talking, as she then supposed.

"I have seen you before!" she exclaimed, on the impulse of the moment.

"That sounds like a novel! what is coming now?" ejaculated Jo, with his mouth full of pie.

Mr. Stanwood laughed very heartily at Nattie's exclamation, and asked in reply,

"Have you just discovered it? I recognized you the moment I entered the room to-day. That is one reason I was so anxious to remain. She snubbed me most outrageously," he added to Cyn, in explanation, "and simply because I tried to be agreeable to her one day at the office."

"But you had no business to be agreeable!" said Nattie, also laughing, and not at all displeased.

"Of course you had not," interrupted Jo.

"I never talk to strangers," concluded Nattie.

"Except, perhaps, on the wire, as you said just now!" he suggested.

"You have caught her now!" said Cyn gayly, as she peeled an orange. "But you will never do even that again, will you, Nat?"

"One such experience is quite enough for me," Nattie replied.

"Still, the next one might not have red hair, or smell of musk!" Jo remarked.

"He might be even worse, though!" interposed the penitent on the stool.

With a strangely puzzled look, Mr. Stanwood glanced from one to the other, observing which, Cyn said,

"You don't understand, of course. May I tell him, Nat?"

"Ah! well—yes!" Nattie replied with an air of vexed resignation. "I suppose I may as well make up my mind to be laughed at on account of that story forever and a day."

"I am as much of a victim as you, for I was intensely interested in the unknown," laughed Cyn; then turning to Mr. Stanwood, she went on. "It appears telegraph operators have a way of talking together over the wire, knowing little about each other, and nothing at all of their mutual personal appearance. In this manner, Nat became acquainted with a young man whom she knew as 'C,' and grew, to speak mildly, interested in him—Now, Nat, you know you did—and so, as I remarked previously, did I—we were introduced over the wire. In fact, he seemed everything that was nice and agreeable, and if we did not actually fall in love with him—you see, I am sharing your glory all I can, Nat—it is a wonder."

"If this 'C' knew the impression he made on two young ladies, he would certainly feel compli-

mented," Mr. Stanwood, who was playing with his knife and fork, here interrupted.

"Fortunately, he never really knew," replied Cyn, while Nattie looked somewhat gloomily at her goblet of coffee, in memory of the romance that collapsed. "To continue this ower true tale!—Thus far all was mysterious, enchanting, romantic. But now comes the dark sequel. One day 'C' called—bodily."

Mr. Stanwood started and looked quickly up at Nattie, who, without observing his glance, murmured contemptuously,

"Odious creature!"

At this he turned with a perplexed look again to Cyn, who proceeded.

"Yes, an odious creature he proved to be. Only think, he had red hair, and dreadful teeth, smelt of musk, wore cheap jewelry, and, in short, was decidedly vulgar!"

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Stanwood, staring at her as if he thought she was bereft of her senses. "What!" and he dropped his knife and fork, and pushed his chair back violently, to the alarm of the Duchess, who was immediately behind.

Cyn appeared astonished at his vehemence; but Nattie, too occupied with thoughts of this newly-revived grievance to observe it, repeated,

"Red hair, all bear's grease, and everything to match!"

"Do you mean to tell me," Mr. Stanwood asked, looking at her earnestly, and speaking with great energy, "that a person, such as you describe, called on you and represented himself to be 'C'?"

"Exactly," Nattie replied; "first telling me he was going away to substitute for a day, and then coming upon me in all his odiousness."

"The story seems to interest you," added Cyn, glancing at him scrutinizingly.

Mr. Stanwood looked at her, at Nattie, mused a moment, and then burst into a laugh, equal even to the one Quimby had caused.

"It does interest me," he said, as soon as he could speak; "very much, indeed. It is really the best joke—considered from one point—I ever heard. And, of course, after that day, 'C' was cut?"

"Indeed he was," Nattie replied, scornfully.

"The circuit was broken after that!" Jo added, technically.

"And a romance was spoiled in the first act," added Cyn, rising from the now vanished feast.

"Poor 'C'!" said Mr. Stanwood, following her example. "Really, Miss Archer, I have enjoyed this dinner better than any I ever had, and the climax is the best of all!"

"I wish we might have such a feast every day!" said Jo, regretfully.

"And, except the damage—I don't refer to any done myself, I—I am used to it, you know—I quite agree with you about the dinner. And as for the joke—I—I—really it was quite a serious one to Miss Rogers, at the time, I assure you. Bless my soul! You should have seen how—how blue she was for a week, you know!" said Quimby.

Nattie colored as Mr. Stanwood glanced at her, and knowing he could not but notice the blush, thought angrily, "How dreadful it is to have such honest, outspoken people as Quimby about!"

"Come, Nat, and help me clear away the remains," said Cyn. Apparently glad enough was Nattie to obey, and turn aside her burning face from the sight of those merry brown eyes.

In a very few moments the banqueting hall was transformed to a parlor, with only Quimby sucking an orange on his stool that he refused to leave, Jo cracking nuts, and the Duchess eating a fig, to tell of what had been.

CHAPTER X.

THE BROKEN CIRCUIT RE-UNITED.

MR. STANWOOD sat down at the table where Nattie was looking over Cyn's album, and seemed to have become very thoughtful; Cyn meanwhile busied herself in dressing an ugly gash the ever-unfortunate Quimby had managed to inflict on his hand.

Suddenly Nattie was disturbed by Mr. Stanwood drumming with a pencil on the marble top of the table, and glancing up casually, observed his eyes fixed upon her with a peculiar expression, and at the same moment her ear seemed to catch a familiar sound. With a slight start she listened more attentively to his seemingly idle drumming. Yes—whether knowingly, or by accident, he certainly was making dots and dashes, and what is more, was making N's!

"I will soon ascertain if he means it or not!" thought Nattie, and seizing a pair of scissors, the only adaptable instrument handy, she drummed out, slowly, on account of the imperfectness of her impromptu key—pretending all the while to be entirely absorbed in the album,

"Are you an operator?"

Mr. Stanwood, in his turn, seemingly deeply engaged in the contents of a book, immediately drummed in response,

"Yes."

Nattie felt the color come into her face.

"Oh, dear!" she thought, "and Cyn told him that ridiculous story! Every operator in town will know it now." Then with the scissors she asked,

"Why didn't you say so? Where is your office?"

"I have none now," the pencil answered, while Cyn, glancing across the room, wondered to see the two so studious, and unsuspiciously asked Quimby if he supposed they were practicing for a drum corps? After a few meaningless dots, the pencil went on,

"A little girl at B m was dreadfully sold one day!"

The album Nattie held fell from her hands as she stared petrified at her *vis-a-vis*, who kept his eyes on his book with the most innocent expression imaginable, one that even a Chinaman could not have equaled. Where could he have heard those words, once so familiar? A moment's thought gave her the most probable key.

"You are in the main office of this city, and

have heard me talking with 'C'!" she wrote, as fast as the scissors would let her.

"No, to the first of your surmise," came from the pencil, "and yes to the last."

"What office were you in?" the scissors asked.

"X n," responded the pencil.

"What! with 'C'?" asked the scissors, and if ever there was a pair of excited scissors, these were the ones.

"Well—yes," replied the pencil with provoking slowness. "Don't you '*C*' the point? Can't you 'C' that you did not 'C' the 'C' you thought you did 'C' that day?"

Nattie's breath came fast, and her hand trembled so she could not hold the scissors. With a crash they dropped on the table, making one loud, long dash. But the imperturbable pencil went on calmly,

"It was all a mistake. I am—'C'!"

Disdaining scissors and pencil, Nattie started up, exclaiming vehemently,

"What do you mean? it can't be possible!"

The consternation of Cyn, who was just informing Quimby that his wound would do very well now, the horror of the patient, and the surprise of Jo Norton at this emphatic and unaccountable outburst from the hitherto so silent Nattie was indescribable.

"Good gracious, Nat! what in the world is the matter?" cried Cyn, starting up and bringing the bottle of liniment she held in violent contact with Quimby's head, a circumstance that even the victim did not notice, so absorbed was he in amazement.

At Nattie's exclamation, Mr. Stanwood threw aside his book, pencil, and innocent countenance together, and regardless of any one but her, sprang to his feet, advanced with both hands extended, and shining eyes, saying,

"I mean just what I said, it is possible!"

Hardly knowing what she did, utterly confused and bewildered, Nattie placed her hand in the two that clasped it, while Cyn stared with distended eyes, Quimby with wide-open mouth, and Jo gave a long whistle. Cyn was first to recover, and began to scold.

"Well," she exclaimed, "this *is* a pretty piece of business, never yet played on any stage, I should think! Nat, will you, or will somebody have the goodness to explain this sudden and extraordinary scene?"

"I—I don't understand!" Nattie murmured faintly, and looking half-frightened, and half-beseechingly at Mr. Stanwood, who in response smiled and said, with a firmer clasp of the hand he still held,

"I will explain in a very few moments how it is possible that I am the real 'C'!"

"What!" screamed Cyn.

"What!" shouted Jo.

"What!!" absolutely yelled Quimby.

"There has been a mistake!" Mr. Stanwood said, now looking at Cyn.

"A mistake!" she repeated excitedly, "what *do* you mean? You 'C,' our 'C,' of the wire? Nonsense! You are joking!"

"Yes, he is joking!" Quimby reiterated, but his teeth chattered as he spoke. "He is a dreadful fellow to joke, Clem is!"

"Clem!" cried Cyn and Nattie, in the same breath.

"Do you begin to believe me?" said the gentleman who had caused all this disturbance, and looking at Nattie, who now becoming conscious that her hand was yet in his, withdrew it hastily, with a deep blush.

"I don't know what to think!" cried Cyn.

"Do explain something, quick, or I shall burst a blood-vessel with impatience; I know I shall!" exclaimed Jo.

Mr. Stanwood complied, by saying,

"The fact of the case is simply this. That red-haired young man, so graphically described by you

girls, that 'odious creature,' was the operator I went to substitute for that day!"

"Oh!" said Nattie, a light beginning to break upon her.

"But how——" commenced Cyn.

"I will tell you how, if you will be patient," Mr. Stanwood interrupted, smiling. "His office, as you," looking at Nattie, "remember, had once been on our wire. He had heard 'N' and I talking, and in fact had often annoyed us by breaking. So, as he was at the city, he took the opportunity to pass himself off for me; perhaps for the sake of a joke, perhaps from more malicious motives. I recognized his description at once, from your story to-day, and I remember, too, his telling me on his return, that he knew the best joke of the season; a remark I did not notice, never supposing it concerned me."

"Yes!" said Nattie, eagerly, "and he was very particular to ask me not to mention his call, on the wire."

"I do not suppose he imagined but we would eventually discover the fraud, however; and so we should, had not you," looking rather reproachfully at Nattie, "in your haste to drop so undesirable an acquaintance, avoided the least hint of the true cause. How the dickens was I to know what was

the matter? I puzzled my brains enough over it, I assure you."

"And that red-headed impostor has been chuckling in his sleeve ever since, I suppose," said Cyn, indignantly; then seizing Mr. Stanwood by the arms, she cried, in a transport of delight, "and it really is true? you are our 'C?'"

"What! am I not yet believed?" he questioned, laughing; "what more shall I do to convince you of my identity? you accepted our red-headed friend readily enough!"

"Oh! I believe you!" cried Nattie, eagerly; then stopped, and colored, abashed at her own so plainly shown delight.

But Mr. Stanwood looked at her with a gratified expression in his brown eyes.

"And you will not snub me any more, will you?" he said, pleadingly; "because I never use bear's grease or musk, and my hair isn't red a bit!"

"I will try and make amends," Nattie answered, shyly; adding, "I ought to have known there was some mistake. I never could reconcile that creature and—and 'C'!"

"Then I may flatter myself that I am an improvement?" asked Mr. Stanwood, merrily; at which Nattie murmured something about fishing for compliments, and Cyn replied gayly,

"Yes; because you have curly hair! You remember what I said on the wire, *via* Nat?"

"Could I forget?" he replied, gallantly.

"And it isn't a dream! You are 'C,' the real 'C,'" replied Cyn, pinching herself, and then seizing Nattie, who, from the suddenness of it all was yet in a semi-bewildered state—there was not a bit of unhappiness in it, though—waltzed ecstatically around the room, crying, "Oh! I am so glad! I am so glad!"

At this point Quimby, who, during the preceding explanation had listened with a face illustrating every variety of consternation and dismay, attracted attention to himself by an audible groan, observing which, he muttered something about his "wound"—the word had a double meaning for him then, poor fellow!—and rising, came forward, took his friend by the shoulder, and asked, solemnly,

"Now, Clem—I—I beg pardon—but is it—is this all true, and—and not one of your jokes, you know? Honestly, are you that—that 'C'?"

"Here is a doubting Thomas for you!" cried Clem, gayly. "But, upon my word of honor, old boy, I truly and honestly am 'that C,' and I suppose you were the 'other visitor of no consequence,' who called with Miss Archer that day I was favored

by an introduction to her. How little I thought it then !"

"How little *I* thought it !" groaned Quimby, as his hand fell dejectedly from Clem's shoulder. "But I—I am used to it, you know !" So saying he sank into a chair. That *he* had brought about such a result as this—that *he* had resurrected the dreaded "C" from the grave of musk and bear's grease was too much.

"But now that all is explained, I am really not sorry for the mistake," Clem said, utterly unconscious of his friend's state of mind. "For, had it not been for that I should never have learned, as I have to-day, from you two ladies, what a very interesting and agreeable fellow I am !" and he bowed profoundly, with a twinkle of merriment in his eyes.

"Over the wire," Nattie added, pointedly.

"Of course, over the wire !" he said, with another bow. "But it shall be my endeavor to make good my reputation, minus the wire !"

"You will have to work very hard to place Mr. Stanwood where 'C' was in our good graces !" said Cyn, archly.

"Then suppose we drop the Mr. Stanwood, and take up Clem, who already was somewhat advanced !" he said, adroitly.

"Ah! Clem sounds more natural, doesn't it, Nat?" questioned Cyn laughing; "we know Clem and 'C,' but Mr. Stanwood is a stranger!"

"Then let us drop him by all means! and now say you are glad to see your old friend!" said Clem, gayly.

"We are transported with delight at beholding our Clem, so lately given up as lost forever!" Cyn replied with equal gayety; and Clem, then looking at Nattie, as if he expected her to say something also, she murmured,

"I am very glad to meet 'C,'" a remark that sounded cold beside that of enthusiastic Cyn. But in fact Nattie was so confused, so happy, and so strangely timid, that she longed to get away by herself and think it all over and quietly realize it; and besides, in her secret heart, Nattie felt a growing conviction that Cyn used the plural pronoun *we* more than previous circumstances actually warranted.

"But Nat," said Cyn, all unconscious of her friend's jealous criticism, "you have not yet told me how you found him out?"

"He telegraphed to me with a pencil on the table, and coolly informed me that he was 'C,'" Nattie explained.

"And then you jumped up and threw us uniniti-

ated ones into a great state of alarm," said Cyn; "and instead of practicing for a drum corps, as I supposed, you were talking secretly, you sly creatures!" then turning to Clem, she asked, laughing, "what did you think when Nat dropped you so suddenly and completely?"

"What could I think, except that it was a caprice of hers," he answered, laughing. "At first I thought she was vexed at my having gone to B a, but she denied that, and finally I believe I became angry myself, and concluded to let her have her own way. Nevertheless, I could not resist calling to see her, when I came to the city, and had I met with any encouragement, I should probably have declared myself, but I was annihilated without ceremony."

"You would not have been, perhaps, had you been honest in the first place, instead of asking unnecessary questions about tariffs," replied Nattie.

"Yes, but you were to recognize me by intuition you know, and I wanted to give you a chance," responded Clem, quickly.

Nattie looked a trifle abashed.

"But I am quite sure I should have suspected it was you, had I not given you up as hopelessly red-headed," she persisted; "why, almost the very first question the creature asked was, 'do you see that twinkle?'"

"So he heard and treasured that remark to some purpose," he said; "well, I will not dispute your intuition theory, since your last words assure me that I do not fall so far short of your imaginary 'C,' as did my personator. I imagine your expression of countenance, on learning the intelligence, was hardly flattering to his vanity."

Nattie, who had colored at the first of his remark, replied contemptuously,

"His self-conceit was too great to attribute my very uncordial reception to anything except, as he said, 'my bashfulness.' I presume it has afforded him great enjoyment to think how successfully he stepped into your shoes, and what a joke he had played upon me."

"Upon *us*, you mean," corrected Clem.

"Certainly; upon *us*," Nattie replied, with another flush of color. "I remember how indifferent he seemed when I hinted that now we had met the chief pleasure of talking on the wire was gone. And I believe he didn't actually say in so many words that he was 'C,' but left me to understand it so."

"And I am indebted to him for being such a lonesome, miserable fellow the latter part of my telegraphic career," said Clem, rather savagely.

Nattie murmured something about the time pass-

ing pleasanter when there was some one to talk with, and Cyn asked, curiously,

"Then you have left the dot and dash business, have you?"

"Oh, yes. It was merely temporary with me," Clem replied; then seating himself on the sofa beside Nattie, and drawing a chair up for Cyn, between himself and Jo—Quimby being at the other end of the room, a prey to his emotions—Clem continued;

"The truth of the matter is simply this, my father, with a pig-headedness worthy of Eugene Wrayburn's M. R. F. in 'Our Mutual Friend,' determined to make a doctor of me, not on account of any qualifications of mine, but for the simple reason that a doctor is a good thing to have in a family. But I, having an intense dislike to the smell of drugs, a repugnance to knowing anything more than absolutely necessary about the 'ills that flesh is heir to,' and decided objections to having the sleep of my future life disturbed, declined, and at the same time expressed a desire to go into the store with him, and become a merchant. Upon which my most immediate ancestor waxed wroth, called me, in plain, unvarnished words, a fool; and a pretty one I was to set myself up against his will! I, who couldn't earn my salt without him to back me!

Being of a contrary opinion myself, I determined to test my abilities in the salt line. I began," looking at Nattie, merrily, "by salting you!"—then explaining to Cyn, Jo, and the silent Quimby, "'Salt' is a term operators use, when one tries to send faster than the other can receive. I began my acquaintance with N by trying to 'salt' her. To go on with my narrative, I had learned to telegraph at college, where the boys had private wires from room to room, and being acquainted with one of the managers in our city, succeeded in obtaining that very undesirable office down there at X n, where I remained until my stern parent relented, concluded to hire a doctor instead of making one, and offered me the control of a branch of the firm here in your city. And here I am!"

"And isn't it strange how you should have stumbled upon us, feast and all?" said Cyn, laughing.

Nattie was again disturbed by the plural pronoun, and also angry at herself for observing it.

"Isn't it?" Clem answered merrily; "what a lucky fellow I am! You see, not being at all acquainted in the city, I hunted up my old college friend Quimby, who asked me to call on some lady friends of his, mentioning no names, which of course I was only too glad to do! Imagine my sur-

prise and delight when I discovered who those friends were! But I don't know as I should have dared to reveal myself, having been so often snubbed,"—with a roguish glance at Nattie—"if that story had not been told and the mystery solved. Imagine my dismay, though, at being called an 'odious creature,' and the surprise with which I listened to my own description! So earnest were you, that I actually, for a moment, thought my hair must have turned red!" and he ran his fingers through his curly locks with a rueful face.

The girls laughed, and Cyn exclaimed,

"What a pity it is you tore up that picture, Nat!"

"Yes," acquiesced Nattie, adding, in explanation, to Clem—"You remember that pen and ink sketch? My first act of vengeance was to destroy it!"

"Never mind, Jo will do another, will you not?" asked Clem, turning to that gentleman, who, upon being thus appealed to, arose, laid down the nut-cracker he held, and said with the utmost solemnity,

"Jo is ready to draw anything. *But* Jo is aghast and horrified at being mixed even in the slightest degree with anything so near approaching the romantic, as the affair in question. What

is the use of a fellow shaving off his hair, I would like to know, if such things as these will happen ?"

"It is no use fighting against Nature !" laughed Cyn. "Romance always has been since the world was, and always will be, I suppose. Your turn will come, Jo ! I have no doubt we shall see you a long-haired, cadaverous, sentimental artist yet !"

"Never !" cried Jo heroically. "But you must confess that this affair is taking undue advantage of a fellow. A *wired* romance is something entirely unexpected !"

"And besides, viewed telegraphically, there is nothing at all romantic in the whole affair !" said Nattie, who, between her confusion at the turn the conversation had taken, and her alarm lest something should be said about that chubby Cupid—whom it will be remembered she had suppressed in her former description to "C"—was decidedly embarrassed.

Before Jo could express his satisfaction at this statement, Clem exclaimed, reproachfully,

"Oh ! do not say that ! not even to spare our friend's feelings can I deny the romance of our acquaintance."

"I quite agree with you," said Cyn ; "I really believe Nat is going over to Jo's ideas. Never

mind ! just wait until your turn comes, you unsentimental Jo."

"Madam !" cried Jo, "when I find myself in the condition you describe, I will come and place the disposal of myself in your hands !" and he made her a profound bow.

There is many a true word spoken in jest, and none of the little party there assembled imagined how true, indeed, these words were to prove, as Cyn gayly answered,

"It is a bargain, Jo, and I shall have no mercy on you, I can assure you."

"And we must not forget that we are indebted to Quimby for the unraveling of all this mystery," said Nattie. She smiled on him where he sat, in his dismayed isolation, as she spoke, and although it was the warmest smile she had ever yet bestowed upon him, he was rendered no happier by its warmth."

"Yes, how fortunate it was, Clem, that you looked him up !" said Cyn.

Nattie wondered that she could pronounce the familiar name so easily. She was quite sure she herself could not.

"Was it not?" exclaimed Clem, delightedly; "and what is better than all, I am coming here to room with him !" At this Jo shook him cordially

by the hand, Cyn and Nattie gave exclamations of pleasure, and Quimby suddenly started into life. "I—I beg pardon," he said, hastily, "but I—I really —I though you said you had rather be farther down town, you know."

"Yes, that was my first inclination, but as you urged me so much, and as I find so many old friends here, I have concluded to accept your offer, my boy, so consider the matter settled," replied Clem.

And in his own entire satisfaction and unconsciousness, Clem did not observe but what Quimby looked as happy as might be expected, at this intelligence.

"'Oh, won't we have a jolly time,'" sang Cyn, and Clem, Nattie and Jo—but not Quimby—took up the chorus.

And obtuse as he was, Quimby could not but observe that Nattie's eyes were shining in a way he had never seen them shine before, that the ever-coming and going flush on her cheeks was very becoming, and that there was an expression in her face, when she looked at Clem, that face had never held for *him.* Nor could he fail to think, that the romantic commencement of the acquaintance of these two, even the episode of the musk-scented impostor, all now enhanced the interest Nattie had once felt for the invisible "C;" neither did he need a

prophet to tell him that the two girls would sit up half the night, talking confidentially over this unexpected and happy *denouement*, or even that Nattie's sleep would not be quite as sound as usual.

Love, it is said, is blind. So, to some things, perhaps, it is, but never to a rival.

And when at last Clem tore himself away, with the remark,

"What a fortunate day this has been! Quimby, my dear boy, how can I thank you? I shall take possession of my half of your apartment at once, to be sure no one shall again usurp my place; until then, *au revoir!*" and, in parting, perceptibly held Nattie's hand longer than was absolutely necessary, Quimby followed him with dejected mien, fully aware that of all the mistakes he had ever made he committed the worst, when he asked his old chum to call on some lady friends of his!

CHAPTER XI.

MISS KLING TELEGRAPHICALLY BAFFLED.

MISS BETSY KLING was quite uneasy in her mind about this time, not only because the Torpedo refused to see himself in the light of that other self, and fled whenever he saw

her approaching, but also because some subtle instinct told her, that under her very nose, was going on something of which the details were unknown to her, and that listen as she would, could not be ascertained. This good-looking young man, who had so suddenly appeared on Mrs. Simonson's premises, who and what was he? From Mrs. Simonson she learned that he was an old friend of Quimby's; that she believed he was also an old friend of Miss Archer's, or Miss Rogers', or of both, and that his father was very wealthy,

"Humph!" said Miss Kling, with a suspicious sniffle. "Strange that he should room with Quimby if his father is so wealthy? Why does he not have a room of his own?"

"He and Quimby are such friends, you see!" Mrs. Simonson explained.

Miss Kling gave another sniffle, this time of contempt, at such a reason being possible.

"Miss Rogers is in here about all her time when she isn't at the office, is she not?" was the next question.

"She is very intimate with Miss Archer," Mrs. Simonson replied.

"And I suppose *he* and that Quimby are in there with them every evening, are they not?" pursued Miss Kling.

They called quite often, Mrs. Simonson acknowledged, as did Mr. Norton, and Miss Fishblate.

"They seem to have good times, too," added kindly Mrs. Simonson. "Young folks will be young folks, you know. And why not? Bless you! we never can enjoy ourselves again as we do when young. There are too many cares and worries when we get to our age."

Miss Kling rose stiffly; this allusion to "our age" disgusted and offended her beyond pardon, and she flew into a spasm of sneezing.

"Well, I, for one, do not think such conduct is proper," she said, as soon as possible. "I was brought up to understand that young ladies should never receive the visits of gentlemen except in the presence of older people!"

Mrs. Simonson only laughed a little forced laugh she had when she did not know exactly what to say. For her own part, although not willing to offend Miss Kling by saying so, she was glad to see her lodgers enjoying themselves; more than glad to have Clem there, as on his arrival she had promptly tacked an extra dollar on the room rent, under the plea that the wear and tear on furniture was greater with two in a room.

Miss Kling, fearing, perhaps, another reference to "our age," left her, and next attacked Celeste

Fishblate, having long ago discovered Nattie to be impregnable to the process known as "pumping," a fact that had augmented her ever-increasing dislike towards her lodger.

From Celeste, she learned that they had "*such* nice times!" that Mr. Stanwood was "*so* splendid!" and that "Miss Archer was just *dead* in love with him, and he with her!"

"Humph!" thought Miss Kling with a sneeze. "It's that Miss Archer then, is it?" Her next move was to arrest poor Quimby in the hall, intending to put him through a series of interrogations regarding the antecedents of his friend, and the length of his acquaintance with Miss Archer. But in this she was baffled, for at the first question, Quimby exclaimed,

"I—I don't know! Don't ask me!" and fled.

Miss Kling, much to her dissatisfaction, was therefore compelled to make the little she had gathered go as far as it would, for the present. But she lived in hopes.

It was perhaps not wonderful, that Miss Kling, sitting lonely by her fireside, and pining for her other self, should feel envious because her lodger, whom she took ostensibly for company, was enjoying herself over the way evening after evening, and

telling her absolutely nothing about it, but confining their intercourse to the necessary civilities.

Undoubtedly the few weeks that had passed since Clem's appearance on the scene ought to have been the happiest in Nattie's hitherto lonely life, happier even than those in which she talked to the then unseen "C," and speculated about him with Cyn. But yet—she sometimes felt that a certain something that had been on the wire was lacking now; that Clem, while realizing all her old expectations of "C," was not exactly what "C" had been to her. One reason of this she knew was her own inability to conquer a sort of timidity she felt in his presence, a timidity from which Cyn was certainly free. Well aware that beside the gay and brilliant Cyn she was nowhere, Nattie had a sensitive fear that he might be disappointed in her. But she did not yet know that the foundation of all these uneasy misgivings of hers was a selfish emotion, the same that had prompted that jealous pang at Cyn's "we" the day he first discovered himself, and this was, that on the wire "C" had been all hers, but in Clem, Cyn seemed to have the largest share.

Twice he had called on Nattie at the office, but neither time could stop, and as it happened on each occasion, she was in the midst of a rush of business,

that left no chance for conversation. But one rainy Saturday afternoon, when a general dullness prevailed, and she was fervently wishing the hands of the clock might move on faster towards six, Clem, holding a very wet umbrella, and with water dripping from his curly locks, presented himself. If he was not, he certainly ought to have been flattered by the blush with which Nattie involuntarily welcomed him.

"Did you rain down?" she hastily exclaimed, hoping by this trite commonplace to distract attention from the blush, of which she was conscious.

"It appears like it, doesn't it?" he answered merrily, giving himself a little shake, and placing his wet umbrella and hat in a corner. "It was so dull at the store, I thought I would run around to the scene of former exploits. Do you not sometimes wish I was back at X n to keep you company such days as these?"

Without thinking twice before she spoke once, Nattie answered candidly, as she placed a chair for her visitor,

"Yes, I believe I do, often."

"I do not know whether to take that as a compliment or otherwise," Clem said, looking at her as if half vexed.

Nattie glanced up inquiringly.

"It certainly is a compliment to my abilities for making myself agreeable at a *distance.* But—" said Clem, with a shrug of his shoulders, "a poor fellow does not like to feel as if the farther away he is, the better he is liked!"

"Oh! I did not mean it that way at all!" exclaimed Nattie, in hasty explanation. "Only, you know, I had more of your company on the wire!"

Clem looked pleased.

"If that is the trouble——" he began, but Nattie interrupted, her face very red.

"I did not mean that, either; I meant it was in such a different way, you know—and I—I could talk more easily, and—I do not believe I know what I do mean!" stopping short in embarrassment.

Clem looked at her and smiled.

"Let us see if it is any easier talking on the wire," he said; and taking the key, he wrote,

"Good P m, will you please tell me truly, and relieve my mind, if you like me as well as you thought you would?"

Taking the key he relinquished, and without looking at him, she replied, "Yes; and suppose I ask you the same question, what would you say, politeness aside?"

"I should answer," wrote Clem, his eyes on the

sounder, "that I have found the very little girl I expected!"

And then their eyes met, and Nattie hastily rose and walked to the window, for no ostensible purpose, and Clem said, going after her,

"It *is* nicer talking on the wire, isn't it?"

Nattie was saved the necessity of replying by some one down the line who just then inquired,

"Who was that talking soft nonsense just now? We don't allow that sort of thing here!"

"How impertinent!" exclaimed Nattie.

"Possibly our red-headed friend is somewhere about," Clem said; then taking the key, responded to the unknown questioner,

"Don't trouble yourself; I shall not talk soft nonsense to you!"

"That sounds like 'C's' writing! Is it?" was asked quickly.

"My style must be very peculiar to be so readily detected," Clem said to Nattie, laughingly; then replied on the wire, "If you will sign I will tell you."

"Em."

"Ah!" said Clem, and immediately acknowledged himself. Then followed a short chat with "Em," in which she endeavored to make him confess what office he was then sending from, which he persistently refused to do.

Having bade "Em" good-by, and closed the key, he said to Nattie, verbally, "We ought to have a private wire of our own, since a wire is so necessary to our happiness! I see," glancing around the office, "that you have an extra key and sounder here."

"Yes;" Nattie replied, "we had at one time a railroad wire, and when it was taken out, the instruments were left, and have been here ever since."

"Do you suppose you could take them home—to practice on, say?" queried Clem, a sparkle in his brown eyes.

"Doubtless, if I asked permission, they would allow me that privilege; why?" asked Nattie, curiously.

"I have a brilliant idea!" replied Clem, gayly. "But do not be alarmed, I am used to it, as Quimby would say; it is this. I myself have a key and sounder, relics of college days, beauties, too, and if you can take home those over there, we will have telegraphic communication from your room to ours, immediately. The wire and battery I will fix all right, and when Cyn is out, and you can't come over, and at odd times, we will have some of our old chats."

"But," said Nattie, hesitatingly, although evi-

dently delighted with the idea, "Miss Kling will never——"

"Hang Miss Kling!" interrupted Clem, emphatically; "excuse the expression, but she deserves it; she never need know. I will undertake to arrange everything, and keep the secret from her. To account for the instruments in your room, tell her you are going to practice at home, and have a pupil. Cyn, I know, will be delighted to amuse herself by learning."

"I should like it very much," acknowledged Nattie, "but——"

"I allow no buts," Clem interrupted with gay decision; "you get the instruments, tell me the first time Miss Kling goes out to spend the day, and leave the rest to me."

Nattie needed little urging, being only too willing to have some more of those old confidential chats with "C,"—which *nobody* could share—and the required promise was given.

Strange it is, how circumstances alter cases. Coming to the office that morning, Nattie had found it disagreeable and hard enough to buffet the storm, and had growled at herself all the way, because she was not smart enough to get on in the world, even so far as to be able to stay at home in such weather. For storms of nature, like storms of life, are hardest

to a woman, trammeled as she is in the one by long skirts, that will drag in the mud, and clothes that every gust of wind catches, and in the other by prejudices and impediments of every kind, that the world, in consideration, doubtless, for her so-called "weakness," throws in her way. But now, on her way home, Nattie minded not the wind, and rather enjoyed the rain ; it may be that this total change in her sentiments was due to the fact that Clem held the umbrella.

Miss Kling saw them come into the hotel together, wet and merry, and scowled. Perhaps in former days she had gone home under an umbrella with somebody—a possible other self—and so knew all about the enjoyability of the experience. But Nattie did not even notice her landlady's acrimonious glance, and sang a gay song as she changed her bedrabbled dress.

Cyn, who was of course immediately informed about the projected private wire, was delighted with the idea, and began studying the Morse alphabet at once.

"And the best of all is that we are going to get the better of that argus-eyed Dragon !" said Cyn.

"*If* we can !" Nattie replied with emphasis.

"Oh ! but Clem is sure of that part !" Cyn said with great confidence.

But Nattie shook her head dubiously.

"She is so inquisitive!" she remarked.

"Yes, and the most despicable character on earth to me, is a person whose chief object in life is gossip! why, life is too short to take care of our own affairs in! I wish you would leave her, and come and room with me!" exclaimed Cyn indignantly.

"Mrs. Simonson would not dare have me. She is afraid of Miss Kling, you know. But I wish I might, for I am tired of being here," Nattie replied discontentedly.

"Well, we will have our wire at all events, and for once something shall be that Miss Kling will not know," said Cyn exultantly.

Unconsciously the dreaded individual favored them, shortly after, by going to spend the evening with friends after her own heart—very genteel, but in reduced circumstances—and as the instruments were all ready, and they had only been waiting for her absence, Clem went to work. He was assisted by the willing Jo, who argued that running a wire was solid work, and *not* romantic, and by Quimby, who viewed the arrangement as another formidable link in the chain of his rival, and clamored wildly for a "telephone," because "anybody could use a telephone." But that, as Clem said, was exactly

what they did not want! Consequently, Quimby, as he lent his aid, felt himself a very martyr. However, he was, by this time, "used to it, you know," —as he would have said—having viewed himself in that light since his unwitting resurrection of "C." Still, he sometimes fancied he saw a dim light shining ahead through the gloom—a hope that Clem might be fascinated by Cyn. Many were, Quimby argued, so why should not Clem be? and certainly he talked with her more than he did with Nattie!

In Nattie's room, they placed the instruments on a small shelf put up for the purpose, just outside her closet, and run the wire through the closet into the hall outside, and thence along, so close to the wall that it was not noticeable, except to those who knew, and then into Mrs. Simonson's apartments. Here, no concealment was necessary, as Mrs. Simonson had been informed of the plan, and, although trembling lest the vials of Miss Kling's wrath would be poured on her head, should that lady discover the arrangement, had no objections to offer, if they were positive "the electricity on the wire would not wear out the carpet, or injure the table"—which was the terminus in Quimby and Clem's room.

Having satisfied her on this point, they deemed it

expedient not to show her the battery in their closet, fearing alarm lest it might eat through the room and overpower her.

"And now," said Clem, gayly, when all was finished, and fortunately without attracting attention, not even Celeste being in the secret; "now, Quimby, we can dispense with that alarm clock we were intending to buy."

"I—I beg pardon, but I—I don't quite catch your meaning," the martyr replied, in evident surprise.

"Why, Nat is to be our alarm clock!" explained Clem, laughing. "She is, from necessity, an early riser, and I shall depend on her to call on our wire at precisely six thirty every morning, and continue calling until I answer."

"I certainly will," Nattie replied. "But I will venture to predict that both you and Quimby will privately call me all sorts of names for doing it. It makes people so very cross to be aroused from a morning nap, you know!"

"It doesn't make *me* cross, I—I assure you; it—it will be a pleasure!" quickly exclaimed Quimby, who was delighted with this idea of the alarm clock.

"I will report him if he shows the least symptom of growling, after that assertion!" Clem said to Nattie, somewhat to Quimby's internal agitation,

for, to tell the truth, he was not really quite certain of being in a state of rapture at six thirty every morning, even when awoke by the clatter of a sounder, of which the motive power was his inamorata.

"And now, to christen our wire!" Nattie, who was in high spirits, said gayly, and she ran over to her room, and a half hour's chat with "C" followed before she went to bed. For a week after, however, she lived, as it were, on thorns, and came home every night half expecting an explosion.

None came, however. Miss Kling's eyes were not as good as they once had been, what with their long service watching for that other self, and overlooking her neighbors; the hall was dark; she had no duplicate key to Nattie's always-locked room; and the small wire, nestling close to the wall, was undiscovered; of course, she heard the clatter of the sounder, but this Nattie explained on the score of "practice."

"Well, I am sure!" said Miss Kling, snappishly, "I should think you would get 'practice' enough at the office, without sitting up nights to do it!"

At which Nattie turned away to hide a blush, aware that "C" and she sometimes talked even into the small hours, in their zeal, doubtless, that the new wire should not rust out for lack of using.

But this telegraphic arrangement came hardest on poor Quimby, who, between his jealousy when the two were communicating, his inability to understand what was being said, and the impossibility of sleeping with such a clatter in the room, lost his appetite, and invoked anything but blessings on the head of "that Morse man," who had made such things possible.

Cyn had no intention of being left out in the cold, and making Jo join her, began the study of telegraphy, and the two hammered away incessantly. It began to be observable, about this time, that Jo was very willing to be led about by the nose by Cyn. Why, was not so apparent; perhaps because there was no romance in it.

Cyn learned the quicker of the two, and she was soon able, slowly and uncertainly, to "call" Nattie, ask her to come over, or impart any little information, but was always driven frantic by the attempt to make out Nattie's reply, however slowly written. Cyn tried to induce Quimby to overcome the horrors of those little black marks, the alphabet and their sounds, but he recoiled from the effort as hopeless.

However, whenever they made candy, as they often did, he had an opportunity of distinguishing himself, that he did not fail to improve. On the first occasion, so uneasy was he about a quiet con-

versation Clem and Nattie were having, that he absently put the mass of candy he had been pulling, into his pocket to cool. It *did* cool, but he sold the coat afterwards, to a boy at the office.

Next time, he forgot to grease his hands, and stuck himself so together, that they had the utmost difficulty in getting him apart, but, as he said,

"It's no matter, I—I am used to it, you know!"

He capped the climax, however, by accidentally dropping a large handful, warm, on top of Celeste's head, aggravating the offense by telling her to "go quick and soak her head;" which, although it was what she eventually did, was too much like a certain slang phrase much in vogue, for human nature to endure; and giving him an angry look, the only one on record ever given by her to a man, she rushed from the room, and was seen no more that evening.

After this exploit, whenever molasses candy was on the programme, they made a rule that Quimby should sit in the corner, on the old familiar stool, and not move until all was over—a rule to which he submitted meekly.

But he was not happy. In truth, all his joys in these days were mixed with alloy, between the pointed monopoly of Celeste—who, of late, and since she had given up every one else as hopeless,

had devoted herself entirely to him—and his secret jealousy of Clem.

Strangely enough, with the exception of Cyn, no one was aware of the exact state of his mind. Clem was as unconscious of it as a child, for any peculiarity in his behavior was laid to his well-known idiosyncrasies; Celeste suspected he was in love, but was blindly determined to believe she was the chief attraction in his eyes. Nattie, if she thought about it at all, imagined he was entirely cured of that former "foolishness," as she termed his one attempt to put his devotion into words. And as for Jo, being so opposed to anything of a sentimental nature himself, naturally he was unwilling to observe any indications of the kind in another, and any glaring revelations that forced themselves on his notice, he, in common with Clem, decided was "only Quimby's way."

Oh, no! Jo could not see nothing but plain unromantic facts. It was no sentiment, or anything of the sort on Jo's part, of course, that made him reproduce the handsome, brilliant face of Cyn, in so many of his recent pictures. Oh, no! she was a good "study," that was all! Nor that caused him to seek her society in preference to all others, to listen entranced when she sang, and to be exceedingly annoyed—a rare thing once for good-humored

Jo—when Clem was given more than his share of her attention. Again oh, no! Cyn was a fellow Bohemian, a congenial spirit, that was all. Neither in the least sentimental or jealous was Jo!

But for all that, and for some unexplained reason, he was not quite so even in his spirits as he was wont to be, sometimes being very happy, and then terribly depressed. Did he eat too much, or too little, which? For if it was not the first commencement of a first love—and of course it was not—it must have been his digestion that ailed him!

Had Miss Betsey Kling known of these little uneasy undercurrents amidst the gayety that so annoyed her, the knowledge would doubtless have given her much satisfaction, besides, possibly, the inkling she could not now obtain of what was "going on." It was a source of great distress to her that she could not ascertain whether it was Cyn or Nattie with whom Clem was "flirting." For she was positive he was trifling with the affections of one or the other, and that matters would end in some kind of a horrible scandal. But for all her listening and prying around, she could not seem to gain much information, except that everybody but herself—and perhaps the old gentleman Fishblate—was having a good time. Nor could she get hold of

anything "dreadful," which was the greatest disappointment of all.

One night, however, listening at her own door as Nattie bade Cyn "good night," over the way, Miss Kling heard Clem call out from within, something that made her very hair stand on end. It was this :

"Please wake me up earlier than usual to-morrow morning, will you, Nattie?"

"Wake him up, indeed!" thought the outraged but happy Miss Kling, as she wended her way back to her own room. "Pretty goings on! and I know I heard that machine clatter when she was not in, one day! Machines do not clatter without a human agency somewhere! There is something wrong here! and I will find it out, or my name is not Betsey Kling! 'Wake him up,' indeed!"

CHAPTER XII.

CROSSES ON THE LINE.

IT happened that not long after Cyn sang at a concert given in one of the principal halls of the city. Of course, a party from the Hotel Norman attended. This party consisted not only

of all the young people, but also included Mrs. Simonson.

Cyn made a great success, and was encored every time she sang. Never had Nattie so fully realized the beauty and brilliancy of her friend, as she did upon that evening. Nor could she fail to observe that Clem, too, was startled into a new admiration. Was it because of this that a seriousness, quite foreign to the gay scene, fell over Nattie's face?

As for Celeste, she was decidedly envious, and had there been no gentlemen in the party, would have turned exceedingly glum. As it was, she, with some difficulty, called up her usual smiles, and contented herself with whispering spitefully to Quimby,

"How can she appear before the public so? it seems *so* unwomanly!"

"Charming, indeed!" replied Quimby, without the slightest idea of what she had said, as his attention was concentrated on Cyn, and his brain incapable of entertaining two ideas at once.

But while acknowledging her attractions, Quimby preserved his composure, arguing to himself in a common sense way,

"What is the use of a fellow falling in love with a girl that every other fellow is sure to fall in love with too, you know?"

Mrs. Simonson, good soul, quite swelled with

pride in her lodger, and by her behavior created the impression in the minds of people sitting near, that she was the singer's mother.

And Jo—unsentimental Jo—was entirely carried away. With the music, of course, for music was art, and art, only in another branch, was his life and work; and was not Cyn a beautiful work of Nature, the mother of all art?

"He will be a very lucky man who shall call our Cyn his," whispered Clem to Jo, as she came out in answer to an encore.

"What!" ejaculated Jo, so savagely that every one turned to look at him, and Clem opened his eyes wide with surprise. "Bah! Nonsense!"

And some way or other, after this, the music sounded very dismal to Jo, and the close air of the room made his head ache; but he had been working very hard all day, and was tired, so this was quite natural.

Was Clem presuming on his good looks, and thinking of making Cyn *his*, he wondered? If he was, *she* certainly would not be fool enough to—Jo stopped here in his meditations, because he would like to have been a little surer that she would not. Very strongly he felt just then that "things of a doubtful nature were sometimes very uncertain!"

It was, of course, no sentiment on his part

that caused these emotions. He did not wish Cyn to throw herself away in matrimony, that was all; and so strong were his feelings on this point that he could not banish the idea from his mind all the rest of the evening, and was noticeably thoughtful.

But he was very gay; even unusually, wildly gay on the way home, and kept Mrs. Simonson, whom he escorted, in such a state of laughter that she burst three buttons, and was all "wheezed up" when they reached the hotel.

"Why are you so thoughtful to-night?" Clem asked Nattie, as they walked down their street behind the rest, in the wake of Jo's gayety and Celeste's meaningless giggle. Celeste was clinging to the arm of the unwilling, but helpless Quimby, and chatting of the handsome tenor.

With a slight start, Nattie replied to Clem's question,

"I do not know. Am I?"

"Yes; you have hardly spoken a word all the way. Is anything the trouble?" asked Clem, and she, looking moodily on the ground, did not see the anxiety in his eyes as he spoke.

"Nothing!" she replied; then startled him by bursting out passionately,

"I am tired of living with no object; with nothing but a daily routine. Can it be there is no

better place in the world for me? That my life must be always thus? I *cannot* be contented!"

Clem stopped short and stared at her agitated face.

"I never knew you were not happy, Nattie," he said, gently.

"Oh! I am not unhappy; I am only discontented," Nattie replied.

"You are somewhat contradictory in your statements," said Clem, as they went on again, for she also had stopped. "Is it office troubles that annoy you? Poor little girl, it *is* a monotonous life!"

Nattie flushed at the tenderness in his voice.

"That is one thing," she replied, a little tremblingly, "but I want something to work for, as Cyn has. I am ambitious; my present position can never content me; I am haunted all the time by an uneasy consciousness that if I was smart I should be doing something to get ahead; and yet, I don't know what to do!"

"I remember you once said something about becoming a writer; why not try that?" suggested Clem.

They had reached their own landing at the hotel, and paused. The remainder of the party had disappeared.

"It seems so hopeless," Nattie answered, dispiritedly; "there is no opening anywhere."

"But it will never do to wait for that, you know. If the world is a closed oyster, we must open it. Isn't that the way Cyn did?" said Clem, half surmising the realization of the difference between Cyn's brilliant success and her own plodding along that had caused her dejection; and as he spoke, he took her hand in his, but Nattie snatched it quickly away.

"Ah! Cyn!" she said in sudden and uncontrollable jealousy, "of course *you* could never expect me to compare with her!"

Clem looked at her a moment, then some emotion flushed his face, and he would have spoken had not Miss Kling, disgusted with her inability to catch a word from inside, opened her door, saying sharply,

"Are you coming in, Miss Rogers?"

"Certainly," Nattie replied quickly, and already ashamed of her jealous outburst. "Good night, Clem."

"But will you not come over and congratulate Cyn on her success?" he asked, detaining her. "I heard a carriage just stop, and think she is in it."

"Not to-night; to-morrow," said Nattie, hastily, and left him before he could again urge the request.

"Oh!" said Miss Kling, as Nattie closed the door behind her, "was that Mr. Stanwood who came home with you?"

"Yes;" Nattie answered, briefly.

"I should hardly have thought Miss Archer would have allowed it!" remarked Miss Kling, with a sneeze.

"I don't know why she should have forbidden it!" replied Nattie, coldly, yet looking somewhat startled. Poor Nattie's nerves were decidedly unstrung to-night.

"You do not mean to say that you are ignorant of what every one else knows?" queried Miss Kling, with a malicious sparkle in her eyes; "that they are just the same as engaged."

Nattie turned a very pale face towards her.

"I—I think you are mistaken," she faltered.

"Mistaken! no indeed!" said Miss Kling, positively; "I should think your own eyes might tell you that! Why, Mrs. Simonson says, Miss Archer has thought of nobody but him since he came into the house, and that anybody can tell he is in love with her, from his actions and the attentions he pays her, and Celeste told me the same thing, long ago. But I suppose Miss Archer is willing he should come home with *you*. She isn't, of course, jealous of *you!*"

There was a sneering emphasis in Miss Kling's last words, that made them anything but complimentary, as Nattie felt; but saying only, in a voice she vainly tried to steady,

"You may be right," she went into her own room, and locked the door behind her.

She knew now! knew what that first romantic acquaintance, that dejection at the companionship lost in the obnoxious red-head, that joy when "C" was restored to her in Clem, that unsatisfied desire to have him back on the wire, all to herself; that suppressed jealousy of Cyn, led to—and what it all meant; that she loved him! and he, did he, as they said, love Cyn? alas! who could help loving bright, beautiful Cyn? To attract him to herself was only the romance of their first acquaintance—and even this Cyn slightly shared; it was not Cyn's fault. Nattie could not be guilty of the petty meanness of disliking her friend because she possessed attractions superior to her own. But if he loved Cyn, then, indeed, had the curtain fallen on the sad ending of her romance; the lights were out, and all was darkness. *If* he loved Cyn? Nattie, with the first full knowledge of her own feelings, could hardly hope otherwise, remembering their intimacy, his marked attention to her, his praise of her, and her winning beauty and talents. Yes, it must be

that he loved her! Oh, why must Cyn be given everything, and she—nothing? What kind of fate was it that marked out the broad, sunny road for one, and the somber, uneven pathway for another? Must her life be one of lonely discontent, a telegraph office at the beginning, and a telegraph office at the end? was this to be all?

"No!" thought Nattie, raising her head proudly, and looking at the red and swollen eyes that gazed at her from the opposite glass. "Life *shall* give me something of its best; if not of love, then of fame! and I will work and persevere until I gain it!"

Yet, for all of her resolution, Nattie sobbed herself to sleep. Not so easy is it to renounce love, and look forward to a life barren of its best and sweetest gift.

And after this there was a change in her observable even to the undiscerning Quimby. Shadows had fallen over her face, lurked in her gray eyes and around the corners of her mouth. The old restlessness had given place to a settled gloom. She was less often seen among the gay circle that gathered in Cyn's parlor, pleading every possible excuse for staying away, and when with them, to his surprise and delight, and to Celeste's dismay, she devoted herself to Quimby, to Jo—to any one

rather than to Clem. For most of all had she changed to him. Afraid of betraying her secret, and unable to control the pain that overpowered her when in his presence, now she knew her own heart, she avoided him in every practicable way, and seldom, even over their wire, talked with him. She was always "tired," or "busy," when he called her now.

Clem, surprised and puzzled by this unaccountable change, at first endeavored to overcome her coolness, but ended by becoming cool in his turn, and talked and joked with Cyn more than ever. And if a touch of the shadows on Nattie's face sometimes crept over his own, she, in her self-engrossment, did not observe it.

If Quimby's hopes burned brighter at this state of affairs, and he was consequently happier, Jo, for some reason unexplained, was not. In fact, he was decidedly queer; now gay, now horribly cynical, not to say morose.

Truly, Cupid, viewed in the character of a telegraphist, was far from being a success; for he had switched everybody off on to the wrong wire!

Cyn, gay unconscious Cyn, no more dreamed of Clem being supposedly in love with her, than she did that Jo was so filled with thoughts of her, that, had he been a different kind of a man, one would

have called him desperately in love. But Cyn, unconscious of all this, saw, and with sorrow, the ever-increasing coldness between Nattie and Clem. For she had quite set her heart on the romance that had commenced in dots and dashes culminating in orange blossoms—a Wired Love. But now, to her vexation, she saw her anticipations liable to be set at naught, and herself unable to obtain even a clew to the trouble. Like the "line man," who goes up and down to find why the wires will not work, she could not find the "break" anywhere, and decided that romances, whether "wired" or taken in the ordinary way, were certainly very unwieldy things to manage.

"It seems to me that you do not use that wire very often now," she said one evening to Clem and Nattie, the latter of whom she had forcibly dragged forth from the solitude of her room. "Were it not for me, it would rust. Why! I used to hear your clatter into the small hours, but now——"

"Now we are more sensible," concluded Nattie, leaning over the piano to look at some music. "One gets tired of talking in dots and dashes after a time!"

Poor Nattie's trouble made her bitter sometimes.

"Yes, one wants a person they don't know to

talk with, in order to make it interesting!" added Clem, not to be outdone.

"Good gracious!" thought Cyn, dismayed at the result of her probing. "This is really dreadful!" then she exclaimed impulsively,

"I hope you have not quarreled, you two!"

"Oh! dear no!" replied Nattie quickly, "what should we quarrel about?"

But Clem, after looking at her a moment, advanced and held out his hand, saying frankly,

"I believe we have been cross to each other of late, although how it happened I do not know! So let us make up and be good!"

Cyn looked up hopefully at this, but Nattie, who could hardly conceal her agitation, replied coldly,

"I do not see that anything has been the matter!" and placing a limp hand in his for an instant, turned away.

Clem bit his lip, then took out his watch, saying,

"I believe I have an engagement down town this evening. I shall have to leave you now, I fear, ladies."

Nattie celebrated his departure by bursting into tears that she vainly tried to hide, and was detected in this situation on the sofa by Cyn.

Cyn's arms were about her in a moment, and Cyn's voice said lovingly,

"What is it, dear? Tell me what is the matter lately? Trust me with it. Is it about Clem?"

With a determination, very brave and unselfish, but unfortunately entirely uncalled for, not to mar Cyn's happy love by her sorrow, Nattie checked the tears, of which she was ashamed, and answered,

"No! I am very weak and foolish. The idea of my crying like a school-girl! I am only unhappy because—because—I am nobody!"

And this was all the information the sympathetic and perplexed Cyn could obtain.

Sitting that night on a low cricket before the fire with her dark hair unbound—and it was fortunate for Jo's peace of mind that he could not see her just then, becauses she was such an interesting "study!"—Cyn thought it all over, and could not, as she told herself, make out what it was all about.

"I thought everything was going on so smoothly," she mused, "and now here is what Clem himself would term a cross on the wire! and no one can find out where it is! Doesn't she love him, I wonder? I should, if I was she! Does he love her? if he does not, he is no kind of a hero! Ah! I know what would test the matter! a crisis! Now, for instance, if the house would only get on fire, and Nat burn up—that is, almost—and Clem save her just in time—that is the sort of thing that brings

these heroes to terms in the dramas ! but I suppose—everything is so different in real life—Clem would not wake up in time, and she would burn to a crisp —or some one else would save her first—Quimby, for instance, he is always doing something he ought not ! no, I don't think it would do to risk it ! nevertheless, I am convinced that a crisis is what is essential to complete the circuit, telegraphically speaking, or in other words, to bring down the curtain on every body, embracing everybody, with great *eclat!*"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WRONG WOMAN.

SOMEWHAT exultant over the new aspect of affairs, and unable longer to endure the strain of the load of love he was carrying about with him, Quimby came to a desperate determination.

This was no other, than to confide in his roommate, and once dreaded rival, and then, provided he was not thrown out of the window, or kicked down stairs, ask his advice about how to render himself clearly understood by *her*, at the same time relating his former unfortunate attempt.

This programme he carried into effect one morn-

ing, as Clem was blacking his boots. Perhaps he had made private calculations on a blacking-brush hitting a man with less damage than some larger article.

"I say, Clem!" Quimby began, "I—I want to ask your advice, you know!"

"I am at your service, my dear boy," replied the unsuspecting Clem, rubbing away at his boot.

"Well—I—I want to know—the fact is, I—I am boiling over with love!"

"What!" exclaimed Clem, looking up with an amused smile, "you are not in love with Cyn too, are you?"

"With Cyn, *too?*" These words were balm to the soul of Quimby, and gave him courage to answer eagerly,

"Ah! no use in that for *me*, you know! It—it is *she*—Miss Rogers—Nattie—you know!"

The blacking-brush left Clem's hand, but not to fly at the expectant Quimby. It simply dropped onto the floor, while Clem gave vent to his feelings in a prolonged whistle.

"Is it possible!" he said, having thus relieved himself of his first astonishment. "I might have suspected as much if I had stopped to think, though!"

"Yes, I—I think I showed it plain enough, you

know!" said Quimby candidly. "You see, I—I tried to tell her of it once, before you came here, when you were invisible, you know, but some way she—she didn't just understand, and—and bolted, you know! So just tell me how to do it, that is a good fellow, for do it I must!"

Clem picked up his blacking-brush, and very deliberately smeared the boot he had just polished, with another coat of blacking, before answering.

"How can I tell you?" he said at last. "You don't suppose proposing is an every-day habit of mine, do you? My dear boy, I never proposed in my life!"

"But you—you ought to—I mean you will sometime, you know! Just give me a—a start, you know!" pleaded Quimby, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Shall I call her and propose for you?" inquired Clem, somewhat ironically, and glancing at the sounder.

"No—no—I—*No!*" cried Quimby in great alarm at this proposition. "She might think you meant yourself, you know!"

"In which case the rejection would be sure!" said Clem. Then flinging his brush savagely into a corner, he added as he went out,

"You must settle it yourself, old fellow! No

one can help us in those matters. There is no duplex !"

Quimby was therefore left to his own devices; and his own devices brought about a most extraordinary result.

That same evening, Nattie coming over to Cyn's room, and finding her absent, sat down to await her return, which Mrs. Simonson assured her would be very soon. There was no gas lighted, and in the dusk Nattie remained, feeling, perhaps, an affinity with the somber shadows of the twilight. As she sat musing, now wishing "C" had left her life forever when he left it with the odors of musk and bear's-grease about him, and now despising herself for the weakness she found it so hard to overcome, she became conscious of a denser shadow in the shadows of the open door.

"I—I beg pardon. Is it Cyn?" asked this shadow, in the voice of Quimby.

"No," Nattie replied, "Cyn is out."

"I—I beg pardon. Is it *you?*" the shadow asked with accents of delight.

Nattie acknowledged the "you."

"And you—you are alone?"

Nattie glanced around the room hoping the Duchess had strayed in, so she might truthfully

say no. But she was compelled to reply in the affirmative.

"Glorious opportunity — I — it must not be wasted! I—I will explain, you know!" he exclaimed, excitedly and incoherently. But to Nattie's surprise, instead of entering, he darted away in such a tremendous hurry that he stumbled and fell, and she distinctly heard his skull bang against his own door.

But his last words were too ominous, and she was too well acquainted with his peculiarities to flatter herself she was permanently relieved of his company. He had perhaps gone to brush his hair, or take some quieting drops, but she knew he had certainly not gone to stay, and not being exactly in the humor for his company, Nattie resolved to fly ignominiously. Afraid of returning to her own room, lest she might meet him and be taken captive, she quietly retired into Cyn's bed-room. In a few moments she heard him stumbling over a stool in the parlor, and was just thinking that if he should take it into his head to remain any length of time, she would be in rather a predicament, when to her surprise she heard him say,

"I—I must speak! I—I hope this time I shall remember what I have so often—so often said in the privacy of my own apartment, to—if I may confess

it—to a pillow—a pair of pants and a coat—placed in a chair as a poor effigy of—of you, you know! Will you—will you—don't speak, but let me alone, hear me and let the—the flow of language come!"

He paused, and in the greatest bewilderment, Nattie stared at the opposite wall. Did he by some powerful intuition discern she was within hearing distance, or was he in his disappointment rehearsing to her empty chair? Before Nattie could decide between these two solutions of his conduct, another voice, the voice of Celeste, said faintly and affectedly,

"Oh, Quimby!"

And then Nattie comprehended the situation. After her own retreat, Celeste had entered and taken the just vacated chair. It was twilight. Celeste wore a black dress like hers, her hair was dressed in the same style, and was the same color, and Quimby had mistaken her for Nattie! And in his excitement and struggle with that "flow of language," he did not notice even that it was not Nattie's voice saying "Oh, Quimby!" for he continued,

"I—I—you may reject me—I am afraid you will, but I must say it, you know. I must, or I shall—I shall explode and fly into atoms!"

Here Celeste gave a little scream, but he went

on determinedly, making the most of his "glorious opportunity."

"I—I am not like other fellows, you know! that is, I mean I have not the—the brass, if I may so express myself, and I am always doing something wrong—but I am used to it, you know—the question is, could *you* get used to it? for I have a heart that is—that is honest, and that beats all full of love—of—love for—you know who I mean!"

There was a murmured "oh!" from Celeste, as Quimby paused to wipe from his brow the perspiration called forth by his arduous undertaking.

"What shall I do!" frantically thought the perplexed listener, divided between the ludicrous part of the affair, and her desire to save him from the dilemma into which he was rushing; "what *can* I do? oh! if Cyn would only come!"

But Cyn came not, and while Nattie paused, irresolute, and not knowing what course to take, Quimby went on to his fate.

"I have thought, sometimes, that you liked some other fellow—Clem, I mean—" Nattie felt herself blush in the darkness—"but I do hope not! the thought has made me boil in secret often, and he loves Cyn, you know—" Nattie's color left her face as quickly as it had come—"but oh!" and he went down on to his knees with a whack that made the

vases on the mantel jingle. "Let me tell you what I tried twice before to say, what is always in my thoughts! I—I adore you! the ground you walk on! and have, ever since I first saw your nose! I—I beg pardon, but I fell in love with your nose! and will you—can you tell me that you don't love any other fellow—Clem, I mean—and share my little property, and be—be Mrs. Quimby, you know!"

"Ah! really I—such a trying moment!—but dear, *dear* Quimby, I never cared for Clem, never only for you—and I am yours!"

With these words, Celeste precipitated herself into his arms, and the next moment Nattie heard a crash as they both fell on the floor. The sudden shock of recognition that then burst upon him, weakened him to such an extent that he could not support himself, much less her, so down they went!

"He must know who it is now!" thought Nattie, with a sigh of relief.

And meanwhile Celeste had picked herself up, but Quimby still remained flat on the floor, bracing himself up by his hands on either side, and staring at her, motionless. Fortunately it was too dark for her to see the expression of his face.

"Did you hurt yourself?" asked Celeste at length. "Let me help you up! We are to help each other now, you know."

Quimby groaned.

"Oh, misery!" he gasped. "This—my destiny is too much for me! Oh! the evil deeds of darkness! Listen to me, I implore you! It is all a mistake! I thought——"

"Of course it was a mistake! You did not suppose I thought you fell purposely, did you, dear?" quickly interrupted Celeste, blindly or willfully misunderstanding—who shall say which? "But please get up, Cyn may come."

At this Quimby scrambled to his feet with startling suddenness, and exclaiming hastily,

"I will—I will write and tell you all—*all!* I have an engagement now with a friend just around the corner!" he rushed from the room, and would have flown, but the pertinacious Celeste had followed, and just as he reached the outside hall, regardless of the publicity, flung herself around his neck, this time without bringing him to the ground.

"It is not necessary to write!" she cried. "Pray, do not take such a trifle so much to heart. Remember I am yours, and——"

Another voice from the stairs just above the pair, interrupted her. It was the voice of Fishblate *père*, and it said,

"Hugging! Marry her!"

"I—I—will!" wailed the now alarmed Quimby, as Celeste blushingly withdrew from her embrace of him. "I—I will see you to-morrow if I—if I live!" and striking his forehead with his hand, he burst away, bounded frantically down the stairs and fled, ejaculating,

"I knew it! I had a presentiment from my youth!"

"Excuse his eccentricity, Pa!" Celeste said. "He loves me *so* much, poor fellow!"

"Humph! Get enough of *that!*" he growled, with contempt.

"And he has a nice little property!" added Celeste, as they went up stairs.

"Property is the thing!" Fishblate *père* said, with undisguised plainness.

Nattie emerged from her retreat on the hasty exit of Quimby and Celeste, so full of regret for the flight that had proved so disastrous to him, that the ludicrous part of the scene just enacted was forgotten.

"Poor Quimby!" she thought, remorsefully. "What a dreadful fix he is in! I hope he will get out of it; and I am so sorry for my share in it! How strange it would be if he should, as he once said, marry the wrong woman, after all!"

CHAPTER XIV.

QUIMBY ACCEPTS THE SITUATION.

WHEN Quimby rushed out into the street, it was with some wild and indefinite intention of flying to the ends of the earth, but recalled to his senses by the stares of the passers-by, he concluded he had better first return and get his hat. When he reached his own room, where Clem was thoughtfully pacing the floor, he flung himself face downwards upon the bed, groaning and kicking his feet spasmodically.

"What is the matter?" Clem inquired.

"I've done it now! I've done it now!" was all the answer Quimby gave him.

"Has she rejected you?" asked Clem, his mind going back to their morning's conversation.

"No! no! she has accepted me!" wailed Quimby, with a prodigious kick.

"*What!*" shouted Clem, stopping short in his promenade.

"She has! Oh, she has!" moaned the wretched victim of mistakes. "I am engaged! Oh, heavens! engaged!"

"Do you mean to tell me that Miss Rogers has accepted you?" inquired Clem harshly.

This name completely unmanned poor Quimby, and he began to cry like a school-boy.

"Miss Rogers!—No! never—never! but *she*—Celeste!"

"Celeste!" echoed Clem; "Celeste!"

"Yes! I—oh!—I made a mistake, you know!" explained Quimby, wiping his eyes on the bed-spread.

An irresistible smile, but quickly suppressed, curved Clem's lips as he asked,

"But how could you possibly make such a mistake as that? Come, cheer up, my boy, tell me, and let me help you out!"

Quimby looked at him mournfully.

"It—it was dark," he answered dejectedly, "she sat in the chair—the lost Nattie I mean, it was she, for she spoke to me! Why did I not seize the chance then? But no! I left her to—to rehearse a little first, and when I returned—Oh!—it was still dark, and I did not know a transformation had been effected—I burst forth in eloquence, and—oh!—it was Celeste, you know! I fled—she followed,—caught and hugged me in the hall! Her father saw—roared 'Marry her!' and I—there was no escape, you know!"

"But, my dear fellow," remonstrated Clem, "you can explain the mistake! you are not obliged to marry Celeste because you accidentally proposed to her!"

Quimby shook his head hopelessly.

"She—she—would sue me for breach of promise you know, and take all—all my little property! And her terrific father—I don't know what he would not do to me! Only one thing could make me brave all!—If Miss Rogers—Nattie, would say it might have been, had not this fearful mistake occurred, I would face even old Fishblate and break all bonds."

"Dear old fellow, I am afraid she—Nattie would have rejected you, in any case. She is—a flirt!" said Clem, somewhat savagely. "She leads people on, for the sake of dropping them, when it suits her convenience!"

"I—now really, I—I cannot think that; even though she had rejected me, I could not think *that!*" said Quimby, loyally; then with sudden decision, "I will settle it now! If I had not put it off before, as I did, I might not have blundered into this awful fix, you know! I hear them in Cyn's room now; Cyn and Nattie; come with me! I—I will have witnesses, and no mistakes this time, you know!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Clem, following his excited friend, rather reluctantly.

"I am going to find out if she—Nattie—likes me, you know! if she does, I will brave Celeste—her fierce father—the law! if not—why then, I must be a martyr anyway, you know, and I don't care how big a one I am!"

So saying, Quimby went across to Cyn's room, Clem, not exactly liking the position thrust upon him, but unwilling to refuse, accompanying him.

Meanwhile, Nattie had pounced upon Cyn, the moment she returned, exclaiming,

"Oh! Cyn! such a dreadful thing has happened!"

"What? how? when?" asked Cyn, while, from the effects of the melodrama she had just been witnessing, visions of Clem, with a dozen bullets in his head, danced before her eyes.

"Quimby! poor Quimby! I have ruined him!" was Nattie's remorseful and unintelligible answer.

"Well, my dear, if you could possibly be a trifle lucid, perhaps I could understand the plot of the piece," said Cyn, decidedly relieved of her first surmise.

Upon which Nattie, half laughing and half crying, explained. But the ludicrous side was too much for Cyn, and she could only laugh.

"What a farce it would make!" she said, as soon as she could speak.

"Oh, Cyn!" Nattie said, reproachfully. "Think how dreadful it is for Quimby, and for me, the unmeaning instrument of it all!"

"Nonsense, my dear," said Cyn, more seriously, and bringing her philosophy to bear on the subject, "It was not your fault! she was determined to have him in any case! Had it been you, as he supposed, you would of course have declined the proffered honor, and she would have caught him in the rebound! If he has spirit enough, he can get out of marrying her in some way. If not—she will make him a good wife enough. Men, you know, as she says, prefer to marry women who don't know too much; so it is all right!"

And with this Nattie was fain to be content. But she felt great pity for the poor fellow; perhaps because of the unhappiness in her own heart.

It is only from the depths of our own sorrows that we learn to feel for that of others.

As Quimby and Clem entered, both Nattie and Cyn looked surprised and curious, but Quimby, so excited now that his usual nervous bashfulness was forgotten, said immediately,

"I—I beg pardon, I am sure, for calling so late, but my business will not wait, and I wanted Clem

as witness—he and Cyn—so as to make no mistake now!" then turning to the astonished Nattie, he went on,

"Nattie, I—I—my feelings for you have long been of—of adoration—no, please, hear me—" as she made a gesture to interrupt him. "To-night, in this room, I addressed another—Celeste—" here he groaned, but recovered himself and went on, "in the dark, you know, with words intended for you. I want to know now, what, had I not been so deceived, you would have said?"

"But what difference can it make now?" asked Nattie, hesitating, and wishing to spare him, as he paused for a reply.

"Every difference!" said Quimby, wildly. "I beg you to—to answer me truly, in order that I may know what course to take!"

"Then since you wish," replied Nattie, with a pitying glance, "I will tell you that as a friend I think very highly of you, and always shall. But, that is all."

"Then come on, Celeste!" exclaimed Quimby, in a burst of despair. "She—she says, she loves me, and I—I may get used to it in time! all but her teeth," he added, in his strict honesty, "to those I never can!"

Cyn felt a mischievous desire to hint that time

might relieve him of his objection, but restrained herself and said,

"But you can explain the matter to her, you know!"

"Just what I have been telling him," said Clem. "No woman would force herself on a man under such circumstances!"

"She would, I feel it!" answered the unconvinced Quimby. "Miss Rogers—Nattie, I—I thank you, I—I shall always remember you as something unattainable and dear, and hope somebody more worthy may be to you what I would have been if I could. But I—I was born to make mistakes, you know, and I—I am used to it—and ought to be thankful it was not Miss Kling!"

"I am very, very sorry!" murmured Nattie, and Clem saw there were tears in her eyes.

"Moral—never make love in the dark!" said Cyn, looking with solemn warning at Clem.

"Be sure that all—all the gas in the room is lighted if ever you propose!" added Quimby, miserably, to his friend.

"I will remember," said Clem, glancing at Nattie. "There are worse mistakes made in the dark than on the wire, it seems!"

"Far—far worse!" groaned Quimby, as Nattie hastily turned her head aside.

"But now, really, Quimby!" urged Cyn, seriously, "do be sensible. Do not be foolish enough to marry a woman you do not want, because you cannot have the one you do!"

But Quimby, with the fear of old Fishblate, and a breach of promise suit, and a dread of explanations in his mind—moreover, having firmly decided that a little more or less of misery did not matter, could not be persuaded to take any steps himself, or allow them to be taken, to free himself from the result of his latest mistake.

Therefore, it came about, to the surprise of those not in the secret, and the unconcealed exultation of one of the parties immediately concerned, that the engagement of Quimby and Celeste was announced.

CHAPTER XV.

ONE SUMMER DAY.

THE week that decided Quimby's fate so unexpectedly and brought him so much woe, to Cyn brought good tidings. Her success at the concert had been so decided that she

was the recipient of many offers for the coming season, and was enabled to accept those that promised most advantageously. No one was more honestly glad than was Nattie in her congratulations; Nattie, who had fought and overcome that selfish pain and bitter wonder of hers, why Cyn should have everything and she nothing.

Since the approach of summer, a much-talked-of project among them had been a little picnic party in the woods, and as Clem now proposed to get it up in honor of Cyn's success, the plan was immediately carried out. Mrs. Simonson, with a feeble protest, because Miss Kling was not invited, accompanied them. The "them," of course, consisted of Cyn, Nattie, Clem, Jo, and the newly betrothed ones.

Nature was kind to these seekers of her solitudes, and gave them a perfect day; one of those that occur in our uncertain climate less often than might be wished, but that penetrate everywhere with their sunshine, when they do come, even into hearts where sunshine seldom glances. So, for the nonce, our friends forgot all their little troubles; even Quimby brightening up, and ceasing to think of his engagement, as they stood underneath the green trees, by the banks of a small river; sunshine everywhere, and the music of birds in the air.

"Is it not glorious?" cried Cyn, like a child, in her exuberance.

"Why not camp out here, and stay all summer?" ecstatically suggested Clem, as he fondled his fishing tackle.

"But it might not always be pleasant like this," said practical Mrs. Simonson.

"When the sun shines we forget it may ever storm," said Jo, and looking admiringly at Cyn as he spoke.

"Is our artist a philosopher, as well as all the rest we know he is?" asked Cyn, laughing.

"A very little one; five feet six!" replied Jo.

"Well, we will have no shadows to-day," said Cyn.

"No shadows to-day!" echoed Jo; then turning to Mrs. Simonson, asked, "I hope you do not still regret Miss Kling!"

"I suppose she would spoil it all!" that good lady committed herself enough to say.

"Well, really, I must say," remarked Celeste, who now gave herself many airs, and evidently looked upon Cyn and Nattie as commonplace creatures, *not* engaged!—"I must say, now that you are speaking of her, that she does *Kling* in a way that is not pleasant sometimes. She actually annoys pa!"

"I thought she entertained a high regard for The Tor—for your father," said mischievous Cyn.

"That is exactly it!" replied Celeste. "*Too* high a regard! Truly, she behaves very ridiculously! Why, she positively waylays pa! so indelicate in a woman, you know!" with sublime unconsciousness of ever having indulged in the pastime of waylaying herself! "Such an old creature, too! she is always coming and wanting to mend his old clothes and stockings! Poor pa actually has to lock himself in his room sometimes!"

The vision of "poor pa" thus pursued was too much for the gravity of the company, and there was a general laugh.

"It is true," asserted Celeste. "Now, isn't it, Ralfy?" appealing to her betrothed with appropriate bashfulness.

Everybody stared at this. No one before ever really knew that Quimby possessed a front door to his name, and he, as surprised as any one at the cognomen Love had discovered, fell back on a rolling log, and clutched his legs to that extent that they must have been black and blue for a week afterwards.

Clem saved the discomfited "Ralfy" the necessity of replying, by interposing with,

"Come! come! let us not talk on such incongru-

ous subjects this lovely day! let us rather talk sentiment!" and he gave a prodigious wink in Jo's direction.

"I fear we are not a very sentimental party!" laughed Cyn; adding mischievously, "except, of course, Quimby and Celeste!"

"Oh! I—I am not, I assure you! I am not in the least, you know!" protested Quimby, taking a roll on the log; "never felt less so in my life."

"Why, Ralfy!" exclaimed Celeste, reproachfully, and to his distress went up close to him, and would have sat down by his side, but for the uncontrollable rolling propensity of that log, which made it impossible.

"How is it with you, Jo?" queried Cyn; "can you not for once, forget your horrible hobby, and be a little sentimental, in honor of the day?"

Jo, who was throwing sticks into the water, to the great disturbance of the bugs, and plainly-shown annoyance of a big frog, made a somewhat surprising reply. Decidedly seriously, he said,

"I fear if I should attempt it, I might get too much in earnest!"

"Oh! we will risk that, so please begin!" said Cyn, but staring at him a little as she spoke. "Jo, sentimental! Just imagine it!"

"Will you risk it?" he asked, still seriously, and

with so peculiar an expression that she could reply only by another astonished stare.

"But really, it does not pay to be sentimental, as you all ought to have found out long ago! as Jo and I have!" Nattie said, jestingly, yet with an undertone of earnestness.

"Then," said Clem, dryly, "since it is so with us, let us fish!" and he threw his line into the stream.

Cyn, Jo, and Mrs. Simonson followed his example. Quimby declined joining in the sport, and perhaps, likening himself to the fish, balanced himself on the log, and looked on with a pathetic face. Celeste, as in duty bound, remained by his side. Nattie, too, was an observer only, and from the expression off her face was decidedly not amused.

"I think it is cruel!" she exclaimed, as Jo took a fish off Cyn's hook.

"I—I quite agree with you!" Quimby replied quickly, in answer to Nattie's observation. "It is cruel!"

"But perhaps the fish were made for people to catch," suggested the pacific Mrs. Simonson, who had not yet been able to get a bite.

"Yes," acquiesced Clem, pulling up a skinny little fish. "They are no worse off than we poor mortals after all. We must each fulfill our destiny, whether man or fish."

"Yes! it is all fate!" exclaimed Quimby vehemently. "We cannot help ourselves!"

"You believe in fate then? I don't think I do!" said Cyn, with a glance half-humorous, half-pitying, at its victim on the log; "what incentive would we have to any effort, if we were sure everything was marked out for us in advance?"

"That is a question requiring too much effort for us to discuss on a warm day," said Nattie.

"Certain circumstances must bring about certain results, you will acknowledge," Clem gravely remarked.

"But, it is said that every soul that is born has a twin somewhere; and if so, that must be fate!" said Mrs. Simonson.

"Miss Kling's theory, I believe!" laughed Nattie.

"If it is so, the right ones don't often come together," said Quimby gloomily.

"*We* are an exception, then, to the general rule!" simpered Celeste.

Quimby groaned, and then murmured something about the toothache.

"Poor fellow!" said Cyn, in a low voice, to Nattie.

"After all, there *is* something in fate," Nattie sighed.

"Perhaps so," she said.

"Well, we will not get solemn over fate," said Jo, cheerily; then, in a lower voice, as he glanced at Cyn, he added—"yet."

"And do not frighten away what few fish there are here, with your theories," commanded Clem.

Although this mandate was obeyed, and for a time silence reigned, it was not long before they were all singing a gay song, started by Clem himself, even Quimby joining in the chorus with a feeble tenor. But they were tired of fishing by that time, and began to feel as if a little refreshment would not be out of place, and would indeed enhance the loveliness of Nature, so a fire was made, and lunch-baskets unpacked.

"It will take a good many of those fish for a mouthful," declared Clem, who was cook.

"You may have my share, I can't eat creatures I have seen squirm," said Nattie.

"Ah, you fastidious young woman! what shall I ever do with you, if you are cast away on a desert island with me?" exclaimed Clem, in mock despair.

"Set up a telegraph wire, and then she would need nothing more," insinuated Cyn.

"And get snubbed for my pains!" muttered Clem, *sotto voce*. But Nattie caught the words, and an expression of distress passed over her face.

"This reminds me of that feast!" Cyn declared, as they seated themselves wherever convenient, with a dish of whatever was handy.

"Only more so," added Clem.

"What feast?" asked Celeste, curiously.

"One we had once," Cyn replied evasively, glad there was something Celeste did not know about. In fact, in the matter of curiosity, Celeste was an embryo Miss Kling.

"I am sorry we have no *Charlotte Russes* to-day, Quimby," remarked Clem, with an expression of transparent innocence.

Quimby could only reply with a groan. The recollections awakened were too much.

"What is the matter now, Ralfy?" asked the loving Celeste.

Again Quimby muttered something about "that tooth."

"Oh!" said Celeste, tenderly, "you really must have it out, Ralfy!"

The possibility of being obliged to part with a sound tooth in self-defense, restored him for the time being. But he was not the only one to whom the retrospect brought a momentary pain. Nattie sighed as she looked back to the day that had brought Clem, but not restored as she then supposed, but taken away, her "C."

"The salubrious air and the invigorating odor of the forest adds immeasurably to the natural capacity of the appetite!" commented Jo, gravely, as he passed his plate for the seventh fish.

"Ah!" sighed Celeste, who prided herself on her delicacy, "I never could eat more than would satisfy a mouse, and since my engagement," simpering, "I cannot swallow enough to scarce keep me alive!"

Quimby looked up eagerly.

"I—I beg pardon, but if the—if the engagement weighs upon you, I—I am willing to release you, you know!" he exclaimed, hopefully.

"You jealous creature!" replied Celeste, archly. "You know, Ralfy, that no consideration could make me release you!"

Quimby knew it only too well, and sighed as he picked a chicken bone.

"A great objection to dining in the woods is that one is apt to find his food unexpectedly seasoned!" said Clem, as he captured a six-legged bug of an adventurous spirit, that had sought to investigate the contents of his plate.

"Isn't it strange that bugs don't seem half so bad in our food here as they would at home!" said Mrs. Simonson.

"Oh! we can get used to anything, if we only

think so!" said Cyn, bringing her cheery philosophy to the front.

"Yes!" assented Quimby, mournfully, "I—I am used to it, you know!"

Cyn laughed, and then proposed the health of the betrothed pair, which was drank in lager beer, and to which Quimby, bolstered up by Celeste, attempted to respond, but collapsed in the middle of the third sentence, and with the words,

"Thank you! and I—I am used to it, you know!" sat down, wiped his forehead on his napkin, and looked intensely miserable.

After that they toasted Cyn, and then "Dots and Dashes," and last, Jo with mock solemnity proposed "Fate."

And just then Quimby met with a fresh mishap, and came near ending his sufferings in a watery grave, only the water did not happen to be quite deep enough. Arising from the sharp-pointed rock that had served him for a pivot on which to eat his dinner, he stumbled, fell and rolled over and over down the bank, and into the river, with a tremendous splash.

Every one jumped up in consternation.

"Oh, Clem! Jo!" shrieked Celeste, wringing her hands, and rushing down to the water's edge. "Save him! Save my darling Ralfy!"

"Ralfy," however, was equal to saving his own life this time. The water was only up to his waist, and he had already picked himself up and was wading ashore.

"I—I am all right!" he said looking up at his anxious friends with a reassuring smile. "I—I am used to it, you know!"

As Clem assisted him up the bank, the thought came into Cyn's head, why would it not be a good idea to push Nat—accidentally—into the river, so Clem might rescue her, and thus bring about that much to be desired crisis? But remembering that water would run the colors of her dress, and farther, how dreadfully unbecoming it was to be wet—a fact fully demonstrated by the present appearance of Quimby—Cyn rejected the idea as not exactly feasible.

They left Quimby drying on a sunny bank, with Celeste as guardian angel, love, and the remains of the repast to cheer her, and the consciousness that his clothes were shrinking on him as they dried, to divert *him*, and wandered off through the woods, and over the hills, gathering on the way so many flowers and green things, that Cyn declared they looked like Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane.

At first they were all together, then straggled apart; Mrs. Simonson being the first dereliction, as

she was not quite equal to climbing as fast as the young people. Thus it came about that Nattie found herself alone with Clem, and suddenly stopping, with some embarrassment, but steadily, said,

"There is something I wish to say to you. You have spoken several times of late about my 'snubbing' you. I want to say, I have not intentionally done so; that I have the same—the same friendship for you as always, and that I wish you every happiness. What may have appeared to you as strange or cold in my conduct of late, is due to secrets of my own."

Clem look at her scrutinizingly, as she spoke, and the flowers he had gathered fell unheeded from his hands.

"It has never been *my* wish that any coldness should come between us; you know that, Nattie," he replied earnestly. "From our first acquaintance, the old acquaintance over the wire, you have held the same place in my heart!"

"The place next to Cyn!" was Nattie's involuntary bitter thought, but she instantly stifled the feeling, and answered,

"Thank you, Clem; and I hope we may always be the same friends."

At this Clem took an impetuous step towards her, and would have said—who can tell what?—had

not at the same moment Mrs. Simonson, very much out of breath, come up with them. Nattie was not sorry. She had wished to say to him what she had, that he might not think her changed manner of late had been caused by any feeling of dislike, and might understand she wished him success with Cyn. But she had no desire to prolong the interview, and gladly walked on by the side of the puffing Mrs. Simonson.

Clem, however, looked displeased, and followed with a thoughtful face; so thoughtful that Mrs. Simonson noticed and wondered at his preoccupation.

Meanwhile, Cyn, with Jo, were far in advance, and had turned into a by-path that led toward a slight rising, sauntering on, Cyn talking merrily, Jo unusually quiet, until suddenly stopping, she exclaimed,

"Dear me! we have lost sight of every one! Had we not better return?"

"No! I do not want to!" answered Jo, bluntly.

"Do you not? As you say, only we must not lose them. Possibly they may stroll this way; shall we sit down?" and without waiting for a response Cyn seated herself on a big rock by the side of the pathway.

Although Jo was not romantic, he had an artist's eye, and could not but note the beauty of the scene

before him, a scene he did not need to reproduce on canvas to remember ever after;—the mountains in the background, the narrow path sloping down from the near hill to where, on the gray and moss-covered rock, Cyn sat, her dark eyes mellow with the summer sunshine, and the cherry ribbons of her hat giving the requisite touch of color to make the picture perfect.

For a moment he stood in silent admiration, then, taking off his hat, and smoothing down his shaven locks, he said,

"To tell the truth, Cyn, I do hope they will not stroll this way. They are around altogether too much. I never can have a quiet talk with you!"

"I declare, I believe in addition to your being unsentimental, and all that, you are becoming a confirmed grumbler!" exclaimed Cyn, as she caught one of the boughs of the tree overhead and turned a merrily-protesting face towards him.

Jo looked at her, and a queer expression came over his face.

"Am I?" he said, slowly. "Well—would you like to see me sentimental? Would you like to see me make a fool of myself?"

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure!" cried Cyn.

"Then," exclaimed Jo, planting himself directly

in front of her, "here goes! now I am going to astonish you very much, Cyn!"

"Very well! I am all impatience! Go on!"

"But it is no joke!" he replied, in protest to her laughing face. "If I am to make a fool of myself I am going to do it in dead earnest!"

"That is the way, of course," responded Cyn, but beginning to look a little surprised.

For Jo seemed very much excited, and his manner indicated anything but a jest. Extraordinary creature, that Jo! His next proceeding was even more strange; that was to ask the apparently irrelevant question,

"Do you remember what we were all saying a short time ago, about Fate?"

"Certainly; but are you going to favor me with a dissertation on Fate, instead of making a fool of yourself?"

"No!" was the solemn reply, "have a little patience, Cyn. The fact is, you are my Fate—there is no mistake about it!—and must be either cruel or kind, and there's no alternative!"

Cyn's surprise increased visibly.

"I am sure, I do not understand you at all! how queer you are to-day, Jo!"

"Of course I am queer! when a man throws his theories and hobbies to the winds, and confesses

himself conquered, he is apt to be queer, is he not? Can you not understand, that I, Jo Norton, who have always scoffed at sentiment, and proudly declared myself incapable of being the victim of love, am ready—yes, and longing!—to make as big a fool of myself as the veriest spooniest youth in existence, and all for love of you, Cyn?"

To this exceedingly novel declaration of love, Cyn responded by releasing the bough she held, and staring at him with distended eyes and a perfectly blank face; for once in her life, speechless.

"I told you I was going to astonish you," said Jo, quaintly, in answer to her prolonged stare, "and I do not wonder that you cannot believe I really love you! I did not myself, for a long time, and I would not after I knew it! But it is a fact. No joke—no mistake, but a sober, serious fact! I love you, love you, love you!"

Jo's voice grew very fervent, as he uttered these last words, and was in such striking contrast to his ordinary manner, that Cyn could but see that this was indeed, "no joke."

"You—you love—and *love me!*" she gasped.

"Yes, I could not help it! I have only known it within a few days, but I think I have loved you ever since we first met, only those confounded theories of mine blinded me."

"Well—but what are you going to do about it?" questioned Cyn, unable yet to recover from her bewilderment.

Jo looked at her, wistfully.

"I know I am homely, Cyn, and I am poor; I have nothing to offer you but an honest, loving and true heart. I suppose a man who is in love is naturally unreasonable—I never was in love before, you know—but an extravagant hope will whisper to me, that even this little might not be unappreciated by you."

And as he spoke, Jo's face was so transfigured that it could no longer be called plain. Cyn gazed at him in wonder, and recovering partly from her first surprise, an unusual seriousness came over her own handsome face, as she answered earnestly,

"It is not unappreciated! oh, no, Jo! Nothing to offer me but an honest, loving and true heart, you say? why, that is everything!"

"Then will you accept it? May I try and win your love?" he asked eagerly, advancing close to her. "I will work very hard to make myself worthy of it, and to win a name you need not be ashamed to bear. I lay myself, my life at your feet, Cyn."

"And this is unsentimental Jo!" Cyn exclaimed involuntarily.

"This is unsentimental Jo," he answered, in all

humility. "Do with him what you will; he is all yours."

Into Cyn's expressive eyes came some deeply-stirred emotion.

"I am so sorry;" she said, sadly, "so very, very sorry! what shall I say? what shall I do? I like you so much as a friend! But what you ask, Jo, could never be!"

The sun sank behind the distant hills, and a shadow, such as had fallen over the woods behind them, settled on Jo's face.

"The idea is new to you. At least, think it over. Do not leave me without a little hope," he entreated.

"Jo, I wish—yes! I *do* wish that I could love you as you deserve to be loved," said Cyn, earnestly. "But it cannot be! it never could be! Do not deceive yourself with false hopes. Friends always, Jo, but lovers never!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Jo, bitterly, unable to restrain his jealousy, "it is Clem who stands between us!"

"*Clem* who stands between us!" echoed Cyn, astounded for the second time that day.

"There—now I have lowered myself in your estimation; I am but a blundering fool, Cyn. You see I am selfish in my love; and I have not yet become sentimental enough to be willing to see another fellow win what is all the world to me!"

Cyn's face grew red as was the sky when the sun had gone down.

"Do you mean to insinuate that I am in love with Clem?" she asked, angrily.

"I would not insinuate it for all the world, if you are not," was Jo's eager reply; "I am not experienced in love matters, but I am quite sure he loves you—and he is very handsome," he added ruefully.

"What a dreadful combination of circumstances!" cried Cyn, distractedly. "But, pshaw! It's impossible!"

"Impossible? No, indeed! Why, it was by being so jealous of him that I first awoke to the fact that I was in love with you myself. Besides, every one has noticed his fondness for you."

"They have?" vehemently, and smiting the rock where she sat with her hand, as she spoke. "But this is truly awful!"

"Then you do not care for him?" questioned Jo, joyfully.

"Care for him?" repeated Cyn, irritably. "Of course I care for him! Is it not my pet scheme that he should marry Nattie? Certainly it is, and has been from the first! And now, if he has gone and fallen in love with *me*, a nice predicament we will all be in. But you must be mistaken! I can-

not believe him capable of such a thing! The only reason I have to fear it is that I would not have credited it of *you* yesterday!"

"But you see I do love you. You believe I do, do you not, Cyn?" asked Jo, too eager to press his own suit to give much thought to Nattie and Clem. "Why will you not try and love me, as you do not love Clem? Am I so homely as to be repulsive to you?"

"Homely? Nonsense!" replied Cyn, momentarily putting aside her newest anxiety for the previous one, "now I come to think of it, I had rather marry you than any man I know!"

"Would you? Would you really?" seizing her hand hopefully. "Then why will you not?"

Cyn allowed her hand to remain in his as she said slowly and impressively,

"I cannot marry. That is entirely out of the question for me. Of my life, love can form no part!"

"But I thought you believed in love?" said Jo, looking perplexed, but clinging to her hand as a sort of anchor.

"I do. I believe it is the best happiness of life. But it cannot be for me. Why, I will tell you. I owe this much in return for what you have given me; what I prize even though I am compelled to

refuse it. What stands between us is the memory of a love—gone forever."

"What!" exclaimed Jo, astounded in his turn. "You do not mean to say that you—that you—*you*, the gayest of the gay—that *you*—" Jo stopped, unable to proceed.

"You hardly expected to find me in the *role* of the victim of a broken heart, did you?" questioned Cyn, with a half-sad, half-humorous smile. "I admit I do not exactly answer to the average description, and my heart is not broken—there is only a blank in it—something dead that can never live again. Once I loved a man with all my heart"—Jo sighed—"with all the illusion of youth, and he loved me. The difference between his love and mine was, that mine was forever, and his was for a day."

"Impossible!" interrupted Jo. "No man who once loved you could ever change."

"He happened to be one of the kind who *could*. I never really knew the cause—it might have been another woman. You know there always *is* another woman."

"Or another man," added Jo gloomily.

"Yes," assented Cyn, and continued. "He was one of the kind, I think now, who are incapable of appreciating a woman's love, and consequently

unworthy of it. But unfortunately, I did not know this, and wasted mine on him. So he and love, went out of my life forever. But," with a proud raising of her head, "I would not be weak enough to allow all my life to be ruined because one part of it was wrecked; with so much gone, there still remained something, and of that I made the most. This is why my art is everything to me, and why I cannot marry you."

"But it seems to me unreasonable, that because you loved one man who was unworthy, you should refuse the love of another who would try very hard to make you forget that first sad experience," argued Jo. "Give me what you have left, Cyn! If it be but dead ashes, I will thank God for the gift, and perhaps, at some future day, in response to my devotion, even from those ashes shall arise another love, so strong, so intense, that, in comparison, the old shall be but as some half-forgotten trouble of childhood, whose remembrance cannot awaken even a passing pain."

The fervor of an honest affection made Jo truly eloquent, and his true blue eyes met the dark ones of Cyn, glowing with earnestness and love, and for a moment she looked at him and hesitated. Then she arose, saying resolutely,

"No! Jo! no! Do not tempt me! The expe-

riment would be too dangerous! To give you a warmed-over affection in return for your whole heart, would only be misery for us both—more misery than I am bringing to you now. I respect and esteem you, as I said before—we will be friends—comrades—always—no more!"

As she spoke, she extended her hand to him, in farewell to all his hopes.

And so understanding he clasped it, a sadness on his face she had never seen there before.

"As you will, Cyn," he replied, brokenly, "but I shall love you—forever!"

As he spoke, from below came the cry,

"Cyn! Jo! where are you? we are going!"

"Coming!" Cyn's clear voice answered back.

"One moment," Jo said, detaining her, "may I —may I kiss you once, Cyn? Once, and for the last time?"

There were tears in Cyn's eyes. She bent her handsome head, their lips met, then, without a word, they went on together to join those who awaited them.

And it was thus Fate decreed for these two.

Love brings the most intense sorrows, the keenest joys of life. But there must always be some lives, into which comes only the sadness, and none of the bliss, of loving.

CHAPTER XVI.

O. K.

LEAVING Clem, on their arrival at the hotel, to bear the burden of the green stuff they had brought from the woods, Cyn, with a trace of melancholy on her sunny face, followed Nattie to her room. For Cyn's joyous picnic, with its gay beginning, had ended sadly enough for her.

"I want to ask you something," Cyn said, with frank directness, as she carefully closed the door behind them. "And that is, are you, can you be foolish enough to imagine, that Clem and I are in love with each other?"

The small basket Nattie held in her hand fell to the floor, at this unexpected question. Had Cyn drawn forth a bowie-knife, and playfully clipped off her nose, she could not have been more astounded.

"If you can possibly reduce your eyes to their ordinary size, and give me a candid yes or no, I will be obliged," Cyn said, rather petulantly, after waiting in vain for an answer. The events of the day had sorely tried her usually even temper.

A little tremulously, while a burning flush covered her face, Nattie answered her,

"I—I have heard it intimated!"

"You have heard it intimated! That means yes, to my question," said Cyn; then sinking despairingly on the lounge, she added, "here is a crisis of which I never dreamed!"

Not understanding very well, and moreover much agitated by the subject, Nattie knew not what to say.

"This is awful!" went on Cyn, savagely beating the pillow with her fist; "what contrary things love affairs are!"

Fearful of having in some way betrayed her secret—the only conclusion she could draw from Cyn's extraordinary outburst—Nattie stood looking guiltily at the floor a few moments, then recovering herself, she went to Cyn, and said, in a voice full of emotion,

"I do not just comprehend your meaning, dear, but it may be you think I might not quite like the idea, on account of that—that first affair on the wire If so, dismiss the thought. You and Clem are suited to each other, and——" Nattie stopped, unable to continue.

Cyn, who had been beating the innocent pillow, as if it was the cause of all this, while Nattie was speaking, now threw it across the room, as she exclaimed,

"Oh! the perversity of human nature! Oh! you degenerate girl! As if I cared for Clem in that way! Have I not from the first set my heart on this real-life romance ending in the only way it could rightfully end?"

A sudden light came into Nattie's face, but it died away in a moment.

"Then you do not care for him? Poor Clem!" she said, in a low voice.

"Poor Clem, indeed!" cried Cyn, pacing the floor excitedly. "I cannot—no, I cannot—believe it of him! He certainly has sagacity enough not to run his head against a beam in broad daylight, even——"

"If Jo had not," she was about to add, but checked herself suddenly. Not for the world would she betray Jo's confidence. What had passed between them to-day should be a secret always, never again to be mentioned—but never forgotten in the friendship and companionship of after years.

"You must be very difficult to suit, dear, if you do not like Clem!" said Nattie, with unconscious significance, after waiting in vain for Cyn to finish her sentence.

"It is not that," replied Cyn, somewhat sadly. 'Do you not know I have only one love,—music?"

"Poor Clem!" again said Nattie, from the depths of her tender heart. "For I know he loves you, dear. He could not help it, who could?"

Such words would have been sweet to the vanity of an ordinary woman. But on Cyn they had a very opposite effect.

"Things have come to a pretty pass if one cannot laugh and joke, and enjoy one's self with friends without being made love to!" she said, annoyed. Then looking scrutinizingly at Nattie, she asked,

"And you—did you really wish Clem and I might love each other?"

Nattie played nervously with the fringe of her dress, hesitated, then replied in a low tone,

"I fear I did not, Cyn!"

"Then it may come right yet!" exclaimed Cyn, hopefully.

Nattie shook her head.

"And he loving you? Oh, no!" she said. "I shall never be able to say O. K. to what you term your romance of the dots and dashes, Cyn. In fact, I have made up my mind that there are some people born to go through life missing both its best and its worst, and that I am one!"

"Pray, do not say that!" urged Cyn, too

disturbed to bring her easy philosophy to bear on the situation. "Of all things, do not get morbid."

"But it is the truth!" persisted Nattie. "Even my name, for instance, proves it! I was christened Nathalie, a very fine poetic name. But, in all my life no one ever called me by it! I was always mediocre Nattie!"

"And *I* have curtailed you down to Nat!" said Cyn, with whimsical remorse. "But what a tangle we are in! First it was the man of musk and bear's grease, who came between you! Then, when he was explained away, came blundering I! Why did you not lock me out of sight somewhere? I would have done it myself had I known——" ironically—"what an extremely fascinating and dangerous person I was!"

At this Nattie could not help smiling.

"Is was not your fault; it was Fate!" she said, her smile becoming a sigh, that Cyn echoed, for she thought of Jo. But yet unconvinced, she said,

"Fate! No; it cannot be! I think better of Clem than to believe he, too, has made a mistake, like Quimby, and fallen in love with the wrong woman!" then starting up, she exclaimed, tragically, "Who? ah! who shall cut the Gordian knot

and bring about a crisis that shall cause this 'wired love' to terminate in 'O. K.'?"

As if invoked by Cyn's words, there came a sneeze from outside, and Miss Kling pushed open the door unceremoniously.

"I wish to have some conversation with you, Miss Rogers," she said in a tone of severity.

"Some other time, if you please," Nattie replied, impatiently, for her talk with Cyn had unnerved her; "just now I am engaged."

Miss Kling drew herself up and said, with even more austerity,

"There is no time like the present, and since Miss Archer is here, it may not be amiss for her to hear what I have to say."

Nattie frowned, but Cyn, not unwilling to be diverted even by Miss Kling from the topic that was so annoying her, said,

"Very well. We are listening, Miss Kling."

"Miss Rogers," proceeded Miss Kling solemnly, after a preparatory sneeze, "I know *all*."

The emphasis on the last word was truly tremendous, and Nattie started astonished, while Cyn looked up with awakened curiosity.

"May I inquire what you mean by all?" inquired Nattie stiffly.

"Yes," repeated Miss Kling, without heeding

the question. "I know ALL. I have for some time suspected that something underhanded was going on. Now I know what it is that has been so carefully concealed from me! I have long objected to your associates, Miss Rogers, but——"

"Pardon me, but that certainly does not concern you!" interrupted Cyn disdainfully.

Miss Kling looked at her and sneezed a sinister sneeze.

"It concerns me to know what kind of people I have in my house!" she replied, "and since you force me to speak out, Miss Archer, I will say that in my opinion no truly modest and proper girl would become intimate with those who pad their legs and paint their faces, and show themselves to the public"—this insinuation struck Cyn so comically that she could hardly suppress a laugh. "My suspicions, to return to what I was about to say, Miss Rogers, were first awakened by hearing that —that instrument"—Cyn and Nattie exchanged looks of intelligence—"you have here, going, when I knew you were not in the room. And now, as I said, I know *all!* I pass over the audacity of such proceedings on *my* premises, but their utter immorality is too much for me to bear! Yes! I found a wire, and know where it leads! Into the room of two young men! That any young woman should

be so immodest as to establish telegraphic communication between her bed-room and the bed-room of two young men is beyond my comprehension !"

Cyn felt a mischievous desire to inquire how it would have struck her, had it been the bed-room of *one* young man? Nattie, who had flushed crimson at the first knowledge of Miss Kling's discovery, now drew herself up and replied with dignity,

"Really, Miss Kling, I think this extravagance of language utterly uncalled for! I admit it was not exactly correct for me to allow the wire to be run without consulting you, but beyond that, there was nothing reprehensible in my conduct."

Miss Kling held up her hands in horror.

"Nothing reprehensible in being connected by a telegraph wire with two young men!" she exclaimed. "Nothing——"

"Excuse my intrusion ; but, Cyn, will you please inform me if I am to stand all night loaded with green stuff, like a farmer on a market day?" at this point the merry voice of Clem interrupted, as he came hastily in, still bearing the burden Cyn had piled upon him. Then becoming aware of Miss Kling's presence, he added to her, "I beg pardon for my abrupt entrance, but the outer door being open, I made bold to enter;" then explanatory to Cyn, "Your door was locked, as also was mine, of which

Quimby has the key; and as Celeste has not yet been able to part with him, there I have been standing in the hall, like patience with a load of dandelions!"

"We were having such an interesting conversation," Cyn answered, with a scornful glance in Miss Kling's direction, "that I quite forgot you and the lapse of time."

Clem instantly became aware of something amiss in the atmosphere, and glanced around inquiringly. Miss Kling immediately enlightened him.

"There are many things you make bold to do, young man!" she said. "Putting telegraph apparatus in my house, for instance!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Clem, comprehensively.

"Yes;" went on the aggrieved Miss Kling, "you and that Quimby, I suppose, did it. The idea originated with you, of course. *He* hasn't brains enough; if he had he would not marry Celeste!" and Miss Kling sniffed in utter contempt of poor Quimby

"Thanks for the compliment to *my* intellectual abilities!" said Clem with a mischievous look; then advancing towards her, he answered in his own frank, manly way, "And so you have found us out? But I trust you will not be offended with us? It is, after all, a trifle, and we said nothing about it

merely because we wished to have a little mystery of our own! It was, as the newsboys would say, a lark of ours!"

"Lark!" repeated Miss Kling, drawing herself up stiffly; "young man, you will oblige me by not using slang in my presence!"

"Pardon me," said Clem, good humoredly; "and in regard to the wire, blame me, if you must blame any one. As you say, it was all my doing, and I induced Miss Rogers to allow the wire to come into her room."

"And I, too," added Cyn, propitiatingly, for Nattie's sake, "I wished to learn the business, you know!"

But Miss Kling would not propitiate.

"Miss Rogers, I have no doubt, was very ready to be induced!" she said, with an effort at sarcasm. "I have heard of young females so much in love that they would run after and pursue young men, but never before of one so carried away and so lost to every sense of decorum, as to be obliged to have a wire run from her room to his, in order to communicate with him at improper times!"

This accusation, far-fetched and ridiculous as it was, yet being uttered in the presence of Clem, overwhelmed poor Nattie, and she sank on the lounge, burying her face in her hands, at which

Clem made a hasty motion, and then, as if aware any interference of his would only make matters worse, checked himself. But Cyn came to the front with striking effect.

"You ought, certainly, to be well informed on the subject of *old* females who run after *old* men!" she said, witheringly. "If one may believe what the Tor—— what Mr. Fishblate says!"

This shot told. Miss Kling turned livid with rage and mortification, and burst into a terrific spasm of sneezing.

"Miss Rogers," she said, wrathfully, as soon as she recovered sufficiently to speak, "your conduct and that of your associates is such, that I can no longer allow you to remain on my premises."

"Miss Kling, this is—is very unjust," said the agitated Nattie.

"It is against the wishes of her friends that she has remained as long as she has," cried Cyn, hotly.

"Miss Kling, your proceedings are infamous!" exclaimed Clem, not able to contain himself longer.

Rather afraid to draw out Cyn any more, Miss Kling gladly seized this opportunity to attack Clem.

"Young man, what right have you to inferfere?" she inquired, majestically.

Clem bit his lip. Sure enough, what right had he?

He glanced at Nattie where she sat, pale and disturbed, at the scene that threatened to end seriously for her, and then, obeying a sudden impulse, seized the key at his side, and called,

"N—N—N !"

Nattie looked up quickly, and while Miss Kling, who supposed he was wantonly drumming on the obnoxious instrument to exasperate her, vented her indignation, and also the outraged feelings caused by the Torpedo-wound inflicted by Cyn, still rankling, in a wrathful homily to which no one listened, for Cyn was watching Clem curiously, he wrote rapidly, his eyes on the sounder,

" She says I have no right to interfere. If you had not so changed towards me—if I could hope you loved me as I have ever loved you, I would ask you to give me the right, and let me put this pernicious discredit to her sex on the other side of that door !"

As these words in dots and dashes came to her ears, Nattie, forgetting Miss Kling, forgetting everything, except that she loved Clem, and Clem declared—could it be possible—that he loved her, arose hastily, with a quick joy suffusing her face, and then their eyes met, and neither words or dots and dashes were needed. Love, more potent than electricity, required no interpreter, and that most

powerful of all magnets drew them together. Before the face and eyes of the amazed Miss Kling, who had just delivered herself of a sentence intended to be crushing, and could not conceive why her victim should suddenly look so happy over it, he advanced to Nattie's side, clasped her hand eagerly and tenderly, then turning to Miss Kling, said, while Cyn, surmising the truth of the matter, embraced herself fervently,

"Miss Kling, any farther observations you may have to make, you will be good enough to say to me, hereafter; and now, will you oblige me by leaving the room?" and he politely held open the door.

"What?" gasped Miss Kling, hardly believing her own ears.

"I cannot allow you to annoy Miss Rogers, the lady who is to be my wife!" Clem added; "and if she and I choose to have twelve telegraph wires, we will. Let me bid you good-evening!" and he pointed significantly at the open door.

"Your wife! Miss Rogers!" echoed the discomfited Miss Kling, and glanced at the blushing Nattie, at Cyn, undisguisedly exultant, and at Clem, determinedly waiting for her to go out. This was something she had not expected, and it took her aback. So, with a sneeze, she drew herself up, gave a spiteful parting shot,

"Well, she has worked hard enough to get you —had to bring the telegraph to her assistance!" and then retreated, before Cyn could retaliate with the Torpedo. Retreated to her own room, to nurse her wrath and envy, and to dream hopelessly, forever more, of that other self, never to come nearer than now!

The discreet Cyn, comprehending that Miss Kling had brought about that "crisis," and that something had been said on the wire to the right purpose, followed her out, and left them alone. It is hardly necessary to mention, that as soon as the door closed behind Cyn, Clem took Nattie in his arms and kissed her. It was an inevitable consequence.

"And now explain why you have treated me so, you contrary little girl?" he queried, tenderly.

"I thought," Nattie replied, raising her gray eyes, from which the shadows were all gone now, to his, "that you loved Cyn."

"You did!" he said, surprised and reproachful; "and that is why you have been so cold and distant! How could you?"

"But Cyn is so handsome, and—I do not see how you could help it!" pleaded Nattie in self-extenuation.

"Of course she is handsome, talented, brilliant,

fascinating, everything that is nice," Clem answered, "but," in a low voice, "Cyn was not my little girl at B m !"

Of course, after this there was another inevitable consequence, and then Clem asked,

"And did you care because you imagined—you naughty, jealous girl—that I loved Cyn ?"

"Yes," Nattie answered, blushing, but honestly, "I was very unhappy, indeed I was, Clem ! I think I loved you from the first—when you were invisible, you know !"

"And I," said Clem, "should have given myself up a victim to despair, like Quimby, if it had not been for one thing. Jo made me a duplicate of that picture you destroyed, and the fact that you never even mentioned the Cupid overhead gave me hope !" and his own roguish look was in his eyes as he saw Nattie's confusion, and laughing his merry laugh, he clasped her in his arms.

"I beg pardon," said Cyn tapping, and entering after a cautious interval, "But I come to inquire if Nat—I mean Nathalie—still thinks, as she did an hour ago, that Clem and I are just suited to each other ?"

Nattie laughed and blushed.

"You see I set my heart on this from the beginning," said Cyn to Clem, not thinking it necessary to define to what "this" referred. "It was such

a perfect romance, you know! and she has been frightening me by declaring that you were in love with me, and was so positive that she almost made me believe it, notwithstanding my natural sagacity!"

"As I certainly should have been," replied Clem gallantly, "only for a prior attachment. You see, I loved Nattie before ever I saw you! Why, I used to pass the most of my time when at X n in wondering what she was like, and wishing—I was as near her as I am now, for instance. And how miserable I was, when she dropped me so suddenly! and how happy I was when I came upon her at that blessed feast, and the red hair was all explained away. And then came another cross on the circuit of my true love."

"And had it not been for that *dear* Betsey Kling with her invectives we should have been mixed, and not had a cue now!" exclaimed Cyn. "I declare, I could hug her!"

But Betsey Kling not being available just then, she substituted Nattie, and gave her a most emphatic squeeze.

"It was your shot about the Torpedo that finished her, Cyn," laughed Clem.

"It *was* effective, I flatter myself," Cyn confessed. "And that reminds me, you must not stay here now, Nat, you know; so I have seen Mrs.

Simonson, and you are going to live with me—for the present"—glancing archly at her, "until that book is written, for instance."

"And it *will* be written, now, I know!" said Nattie, earnestly, her eyes shining. "You remember what you once said, Cyn? I see now you were right."

"Yes;" said Cyn, seriously, "and thank Heaven that it was love, and not disappointment, that came!"

"Love shall not come in vain!" Nattie said, as seriously. "I will be worthy of it!"

The after years only could prove her words. But in Clem's face the belief in them was written as plainly as if those future possibilities were acknowledged results.

"We must have another feast to celebrate events!" Cyn said then, gayly. "You are happy; my romance is O. K.; Celeste is ecstatic; Quimby as joyful as circumstances permit the victim of mistake to be; Jo and I are hopeful of future fame—and we certainly must have a feast!"

"With plenty of dishes this time," laughed Clem, "and there shall be no more crosses on the wire!"

"But bless my heart!" ejaculated Cyn, "here you two are making love like ordinary mortals"—at this Nattie hastily withdrew the hand Clem had taken—"Quimby and Celeste, for instance! This

will never do! We must end this romance of dots and dashes as it commenced, to make it truly 'Wired Love!'"

"True enough! so we must!" answered Clem merrily, and rising, he went to the "key," with his eyes looking straight into Nattie's, and wrote something that made her blush and seize his hand in shy and unnecessary alarm, saying,

"Suppose Jo should be over in your room! He might be able to read it!"

"Very well," replied Clem, as he laughed and kissed her, regardless of the spectator. "I am quite content to make love like common mortals, Cyn, and I hope, my darling Nattie, that we are done now with all 'breaks' and 'crosses,' as we are with Wired Love. Henceforth ours shall be the pure, unalloyed article, genuine love!"

And Nattie, half-laughing, half-serious, but wholly glad, took the key and wrote,

"O. K."

If any one is anxious to know what Clem wrote when Nattie stopped him, here it is.

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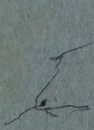
THE END.



PRESERVATION REVIEW

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